

sunlight and obsidian

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sunlight and obsidian

by [Kiyii](#)

Summary

‘Dream. Enough now.’ Quackity says softly, axe pressing against Dream’s throat. His entire neck is exposed to the tepid air and Quackity caresses it with the steel edge, as though searching for the right spot.

‘Enough. Don’t make me do this.’

A tear rolls down Dream’s cheek as his jaw tenses. It would be so simple. So, so simple just to give in, and offer up the information Quackity desires. But Dream’s never made anything easy.

or

Dream's time in Pandora's Vault is brought to a sudden end, courtesy of an old rival, a winged man, and a favour.

Notes

Hello! This is my first fic, hope you enjoy it! I'm not a c!Dream apologist in the sense that I think he's a good person, but I do think he's very interesting and I'm a sucker for angst and hurt/comfort. Also, I think a redemption arc would be a good thing for the storyline. This starts with Dream in prison but quickly moves onto other things. If you wanna chat to me/ask me questions, feel free to do it on my tumblr, gendermen.tumblr.com :)
warnings: contains torture, violence, abuse, thoughts of suicide, vomiting, some discussions of disordered eating

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

Chapter 1

A purple drip plinks onto the floor by Dream's nose. He watches it through his lashes, cheek pressed to the uneven floor as it rolls past his eyeline and joins the small puddle forming in a dent in the obsidian. He waits for the next one with bated breath. It would be a rare moment of relief if Quackity were to let him lie there, undisturbed, for long enough for a second droplet to fall. Today he is not so lucky.

The axe glances off his shoulder, and embeds itself into the wall directly above Dream's head with a sharp crack. He cringes away, acting entirely on instinct - his brain, fogged and blurry, struggles to conceptualise the danger. He feels his eyes water again as he curls closer into himself. He keeps asking himself the same question – *what next? What will Quackity aim for now?* If he can predict it, maybe he can minimise the damage. It's probably a futile effort, but weeks of torture can make you desperate for even the smallest relief, and right now Dream would take anything.

A hand bunches into his hair, yanking his eyeline up to face the obsidian ceiling. *So much for that.* Quackity is visible in his periphery, a stoic expression on his face, as if it pains him to do this.

'Dream. Enough now.' He says softly, axe pressing against Dream's throat gently. His entire neck is exposed to the tepid air and Quackity caresses it with his axe, as though searching for the right spot.

'Enough. Don't make me do this.'

A tear rolls down Dream's cheek as his jaw tenses. *It would be so easy.* So, so easy just to give in, and offer up the information Quackity desires. But Dream's never made anything easy. And the thought of what Quackity might do with the revive book is enough for him to steel himself one more time.

'I can't, Q.' He rasps out. Quackity grits his teeth, and pulls him further upright by the roots of his hair. It feels like his scalp is on fire, and Dream lets out a tiny, hoarse cry.

'No, no, no,' Quackity chuckles airily. 'No, Dream, you can, but you won't. There's a big, very big difference there, friend.' He spits the last word out, and drops Dream back to the ground. He crumples back onto the floor like a doll. Even in his battered state, nose oozing blood and ribs shattered, he is resolute.

Quackity's boot stomps down onto his hand and a shock of pain jolts up his arm and across the entire left half of his torso, and Dream lets out another strangled gasp. *Please*, he thinks, desperately hoping, pleading, *please*. And then Quackity grinds his heel into the back of his hand with all his body weight behind it, and those thoughts dissipate, and it's all he can do to stay conscious.

The pressure on his hand releases, and he lets out a breath. Quackity's boot connects with Dream's jaw, a mark of his frustration which Dream barely notices, and then his tormentor starts calling for Sam. The lava drops, ushering cold air into the cell, and Dream hazily watches Quackity's figure retreat across the bridge before the lava curtain reappears. Dream closes his eyes. Sleep – no, not sleep, more like forced unconsciousness – overtakes him. He knows it will only make Quackity's next visit come around sooner, but he physically cannot bear to be awake now that his body knows the imminent danger has passed. His shoulders finally unclench.

The next day brings a similar set of circumstances. And so does the day after that. The day after

that one, however, is marked by a particular act of cruelty on Quackity's part. He brings a brand with him – a poker in the shape of a 'Q'.

'I use it to brand all the lovely leather chairs in the casino,' He explains, as Dream huddles in the corner. This was permanent – scars are not wiped clean after respawns, and Dream knows that what little pride he has remaining will be torn away from him once and for all. He even thinks of calling for Sam, for a split second, before dismissing it. He'd screamed for Sam for weeks back when Quackity first started visiting. He'd never come.

As he watches Quackity turn the poker in the lava, red glow emitting from the end, he starts to think of Sapnap. Fire was always his domain, and Dream thinks vaguely that it's fitting that he be punished with burning. Sapnap hadn't visited in months. Sapnap's fiancé, however, hadn't missed a day.

'You know that leather's just like skin, right Dream?' He casts a little smile in Dream's direction.

Dream thinks he's going to pass out.

'Oh, looks like it's hot enough now!' Quackity continues, spitting onto the glowing metal and watching it sizzle. 'Are you ready?'

Dream claws hopelessly at the obsidian, as if it would somehow give way and send him tumbling out of Quackity's reach, his mind running at a million miles an hour.

'Please, please.' He begs, nails scraping against the wall. Quackity pays no mind. It's a searing flash of pain, just below his collarbone, and there it is. He's marked for life, a blistered and crimson 'Q' in cursive font. It feels as though someone has ripped his heart from his chest, and Dream screams. He screams until he feels like he's exhaled his lungs and vocal cords all at once and all that's left is a hollow void beneath his new scar. *This*, Dream thinks, *this is worse*.

It's worse than the isolation and the starving, it's worse than the horrific smell that's built up after months of spilled blood glazing the walls, it's worse than all of it combined and more.

Quackity tosses the poker to the side, and crouches down, grasping Dream's jaw with his left hand.

'Do you get it now?' He spits. 'Do you understand? It's getting serious from here, Dream. I'm a very creative guy, even you can admit that.' He spits onto the wound on Dream's chest.

And Dream vomits, over Quackity's hand and directly into his own lap.

Quackity backs away, with a disgusted noise. Blearily, Dream is aware that Quackity has picked up his poker, and shouting for Sam, but he passes out from the pain before the lava drops.

He dreams of green fields. Open seas. The breeze through his hair. It's the first time in a while that he's managed to conjure up something akin to relief from the nightmare that he faces in his waking hours, and Dream is so grateful, when he wakes up, and the smell of vomit hits his nose, that he could have those moments of bliss. The pain on his collarbone has faded significantly. It feels tight, and swollen but only hurts when he moves it. He shifts onto his side, wheezing with the effort, and desperately tries to stay lucid enough to properly wake up, so he can take stock of his injuries.

Despite his efforts, his ribs are aching too much for him to continue to lie that way. He attempts to lift his back off the ground with his one good hand, and gets halfway to sitting before his muscles give way, and he falls back to the ground. *Don't be pathetic*, he thinks. *Don't be so fucking pathetic*. He tries and fails again.

And as he's lying there, blood and vomit staining his clothes and with more bones broken than not, the lowest point of his 21-year life, he thinks of his friends. He thinks of Sam, before the Warden took over, and their endless conversations while building the very prison in which he now resides. He thinks of Punz, and his competitive streak, the way him and Sapnap would go at each other for hours in meaningless competitions, only to be forgotten the very next morning. He thinks of when they would fight for fun, not bloodshed.

And George, oh, George.

He closes his eyes again. George, who was at his side the day he created this world. George, who he crowned and dethroned just to prove a point. George, who retreated to his little home to escape what he could see Dream was becoming. George, who might not even know that Dream is being tortured like this.

A tear forms in his eye.

George, who Dream treated as disposable simply because he needed to seem unmoored, unattached.

It rolls down his cheek.

George.

A sob breaks the silence in the obsidian box. It ripped from his throat without his consent, and he brings his good hand up to his mouth to silence another that he can feel building in his chest.

He wonders what George would say if he could see Dream now. Would he be horrified? Would he be pitying? Worse, would he think that Dream deserves it?

Do I deserve it? Is this my penance? My eternal purgatory of neither life nor death. Unable to die but unwilling to live.

His hand twinges. The carpal bones are broken.

But Dream has broken the dam in his mind that was preventing him from thinking of George. He holds onto the silly little hope that he don't know what's going on, that he is ignorant and not complicit. It gives him strength, and it hurts so much.

Quackity arrives the next day, like clockwork. He tells Dream that he isn't allowed to speak anymore unless he has Quackity's permission. Dream accepts this mutely.

The day after, Quackity nearly fully severs his Achilles tendon on his left leg. Now he can't walk, or run, or talk.

It continues to escalate, Quackity dishing out more and more severe punishments and cruel acts, his fingernails are burned off and his scars reopened, and he endures it for what seems like months.

Dream thinks of seeing the sky, one last time before he dies.

He thinks of George.

Quackity would use the book to torment him, and Dream, even in his broken down and pliant state, cannot allow him to do that to George.

It enrages Quackity.

‘You think you’re so fucking strong, huh, Dream?’ He mutters. ‘You think you’ve got an ounce, a semblance of control here? Look at me.’

Dream meets his eyes. The scar that runs through Quackity’s lip and cheek is puckered and red, Dream notices. It looks inflamed. He wonders if it’s because of the exertion, or maybe the heat. A tiny smile crosses his lips, just for a second, and Quackity notices it. He pays for that for hours, long into the night.

The routine persists. Until, just as Dream is beginning to give up even his most simple fantasies of drinking cool water, or having clean hair, one day, Quackity doesn’t come. The lava walls relentlessly pour down, and Dream thinks that he must just have underestimated how long it had been. But time stretches on and on, until Dream is forced to face the irrefutable fact – Quackity has skipped a day. Possibly more – he isn’t sure, but he is grateful, and so is his body. He gets a chance to eat, and digest without throwing it up. His cuts scab over, instead of constantly weeping blood and pus and whatever else might be coming out of them.

At first, he feels relief. Then, he feels guilty. God, what has Quackity done to him, that he feels guilt when his torturer plays truant. *Maybe it’s more dread*, he reasons. *I’ll be paying for this somehow*. He clings to this logic, refusing to accept that, perhaps, just perhaps, Quackity had gotten under his skin. That something has changed in him, permanently, that he’ll never be able to shake the shadow of this cell off his back, if he ever manages to leave it.

He imagines his friends faces when they see him again. In his wildest fantasies, they are horrified at the state of him. In what he considers the more realistic ones, he’s faced with apathy from Sapnap and Punz, and outright disgust from George.

But he’s just thinking, with cautious optimism, something may have changed, someone may have taken pity on him, when the lava wall stutters and breaks. His heart drops into his stomach like a stone. Very clever of him. Nothing is more compelling than hope, and nothing is more devastating than false hope. Dream understands. It was a trick. He closes his eyes as he listens to the platform make its way over to his cell.

He doesn’t move. He’s propped up between the lectern and the wall, supporting his poor ankle by elevating it with a book from the chest. His other knee is hugged tight to his chest, his forehead resting on the obsidian wall. He can’t bring himself to look up, even as he hears the netherite barrier drop. The footsteps draw closer, and he can’t help but tense.

He’s ready. He can do this. He’s done it for months; this is no different. His throat closes up as he tries to drown the sob that threatens to leap from his chest as a shadow falls over his face. An unfamiliar voice curls around his ears.

‘Dream?’

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

A cabin in the tundra receives a letter

Chapter Notes

aiming for shorter updates, more often right now, but that might change in the future!
no warnings in this one :) enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Technoblade is, generally, a pretty asocial person. He's deliberately chosen to live in a tundra, covered in snow half the year and surprisingly cold sunshine the other. It's far away from the temperate climate of the majority of the SMP, and sneakily concealed by mountains on three sides. It's a tactically sound location – not least because almost nobody can actually find the place. The cold doesn't bother him, despite his piglin genetics, but even if it did, he'd never trade it in for a more welcoming locale. He can go for months without seeing another person, and that's how he likes it.

Oh, except for Phil.

In Techno's brain, Phil doesn't really count as a person – not in a demeaning way, just that his normally easily depleted social battery seems to have endless energy for Phil's presence. They have separate houses, but seem to gravitate to each other's company most of the day. Typically, Techno will wake up at midday, rousing from the few hours of sleep he's snatched from his whirring brain to the smell of Phil cooking lunch. He'll grumble to himself about how tired he feels, then wrap himself up in his cloak and make the short trip to Phil's house, where he's greeted with a smile and perhaps a murmured word of welcome. He'll sit at the table, rubbing the sleep out of his eyes while Phil dishes up a bowl of stew, soup or a sandwich in front of him, and a glass of water, because he's worried that Techno doesn't drink enough.

By the time he's started the meal, he's normally awake enough to engage in a conversation. He'll ask Phil how he is, Phil will give a polite response, and return the question. Techno will make a dry comment about his own sleep habits, and then thank Phil for the food. Phil will nod in reply, and then they'll silently sit together, eating and watching the local wildlife through the back door window.

(He's become very invested in the hare politics of late – there's two males fighting over territory at the moment, and watching them box for dominance is excellent entertainment.)

Once the food is finished and he's taken a moment to let it go down, Techno will pick up the bowls and glasses, and wash them up. Phil will say he doesn't have to, and Techno will ignore him. Once they're dried, he and Phil will go about their daily tasks, chatting and joking as they do. Some days he tends to their shared farm, pruning the plants with intense focus, and some days he'll sit and read in the battered armchair by Phil's fire. He always cooks their dinner, which is a more

lively affair, filled with debates and sarcastic conversations, and then Phil will wash up. Then, they'll play cards, or Techno will practice his violin while Phil knits and listens.

After an hour or so, Phil will yawn and stretch, and head to bed. A few hours later, Techno will too.

It's a calm and repetitive routine, restful and meditative for Techno's frayed nerves. After the Butcher Army incident and the war, he's decided that he really, *really* needs a break from fighting, and frankly, the SMP at large.

It's simple.

It's peaceful.

It's *safe*.

And then, on an idle Tuesday evening, a letter arrives by carrier crow. The bird taps on the window incessantly until Phil finally deems it annoying enough to interrupt their card game. He opens the window, and the crow hops in, cawing indignantly.

'What the hell..?' Phil mutters, untying the letter from the bird's leg. He turns the envelope over in his hands, and raises his eyebrows in surprise as he walks back over to the table.

'It's for you.'

Techno blinks. He'd been lost in consideration of his next move, Phil's up by three games right now so he really needs this win. He takes the letter from Phil's hand.

'Get out from behind me, you're looking at my cards.' He monotones to Phil, who snorts derisively in response, and sits down opposite him again.

'Who's it from, do you think?'

'I don't know.' Techno responds absently. He examines the penmanship on the envelope. It's just his name, no address, which Techno supposes makes sense – what would the address even be? The crow must be smart to find it's way here.

He glances up just as it bonks its beak against the window glass. Perhaps not. He passes the letter to Phil.

'Do you recognise the handwriting?' He asks. Phil shakes his head, and hands it back. 'Hmm. Do you think it's a good idea to open it? It might be poisoned.'

Phil shrugs. 'We have milk, don't we? Go on, I'm curious!' Techno laughs, ripping the top of the envelope with his index finger. He discards it, and opens up the letter held within, eyes scanning the page with increasing curiosity. He clears his throat and begins to read aloud.

'Dear Technoblade.

It's been a while. I hope life's been treating you well. I'm sending this note to let you know that I'm in a sticky situation, and could use your company. You remember the prison, I'm sure – let's just say I've become intimately familiar with it in the last few months, and I'm growing rather bored of my current position. Do me a favour, come and visit? It'll relieve me of some boredom. I miss my sparring partner.

Dream.'

Techno finishes, brain suddenly jumping into gear. This is no ordinary request – there's several hidden meanings in here. He relays that to Phil, who furrows his brow.

'What do you mean? Seems like he's just asking for you to give him some company. I heard he'd been imprisoned, but to be honest I thought it was just a rumour.'

'No, no,' Techno shakes his head. 'no, Dream and I have always been good at word games. His letters must be monitored by someone, but they've clearly not noticed. Here, look.'

He leans over the table, pushing the forgotten cards aside, and points to the third sentence.

'He's used the word 'sticky' – that's a pretty weird adjective to use. He's done it on purpose – he's literally, physically stuck somewhere, I assume that great big box he built a few months ago. And here, again. 'I'm growing bored of my current *position*'; he's referencing his physical location.'

Phil stares at him in wonder.

'When the hell did you become a cryptographer? I mean, it makes sense, but are you sure?'

Techno nods. 'Dream and I spent a lot of time together after the duel, training. We talked a lot, and I was going through a cryptic crossword phase at the time, so he must know that this is obvious to me.'

'You went through a cryptic crossword phase?' Phil says, a hint of teasing in his voice.

Techno raises an eyebrow. 'Do we need to discuss your crow befriending endeavours from last year?'

Phil chuckles. 'Fair enough. Is there anything else in there?'

Techno nods. 'Yes, two more that I've spotted. This one's really obvious, I'm surprised whoever's monitoring it didn't catch it – he's used the word 'favour', that should be clear enough, he's redeeming that favour in asking me to help him escape. And finally, he mentions a sparring partner. It's a warning to prepare for a fight.' He finishes. Phil looks impressed.

Techno puts the letter down on the table between his elbows, and rests head on his hands. He's thinking now, brain suddenly jumping back into a tactical mindset. Phil gently rests his hand on Techno's shoulder.

'You okay, mate?' He queries softly, and Techno nods slightly.

'I'm thinking.'

'You gonna go?'

'Of course,' Techno responds immediately. 'He saved my life. It's about time I repaid that favour. And I'm not a fan of prisons anyway, they're not exactly anarchistic. I'm not thinking about whether I should do it, I'm thinking about how I should do it.'

Phil breathes out heavily, leaning back into his chair. 'That's fair.'

'It'll be risky any way I do it, I think. I'm not sure who's guarding it, or how intricate the security is, so I'll be playing it by ear, I expect. I'll need my good armour, enderpearls, probably a totem just to be safe, and I'll go at night-'

Phil interrupts him. 'We'll go at night.'

Techno meets his gaze, still for a second, before nodding.

'Okay.' A smile crosses his face briefly. 'We'll go at night.'

Phil grins.

The letter has injected a source of excitement into both of their lives, and both Techno and Phil would be lying if they said it didn't feel good. As nice as their gentle existence has been for the past months, they've both missed the adrenaline, the giddy excitement that comes with plotting a mission like this. Their usual lunchtimes are replaced by fast-paced brainstorming, running through imaginary scenarios and coming up with hare brained schemes that would probably never work in practice.

They start training again, together. They start with basic drills, but get bored after half an afternoon of clunking wooden swords and decide to skip the basics and jump to proper sparring. Techno dominates, obviously, but Phil's no pushover, especially once he starts utilising his wings.

Personally, Techno thinks that's cheating. Almost nobody else on the damn server has wings, and nobody has an elytra, so what's the point in drilling it? But it's novel, and Techno supposes it's good practice for Phil.

They set a date – two weeks from the day the letter arrived. It gives them time to prepare, build up confidence, as well as revive their well-practised joint fighting style. Techno restocks his depleted enderpearl stores, and they both start fine tuning their movements – walking silently and quickly, Phil learning to swoop with minimal air movement.

On the 14th night from the arrival of the crow, they set off in the mid-morning, preparing to make the trek into the town. They've decided a diversion is essential – a big one. One that will distract everyone, if possible, and a good way to do that is to find something everyone cares about, and blow it to smithereens. *A trick from Wilbur's playbook*, Techno thinks, as that giant hotel appears from the dusk.

They make a beeline for Church Prime, quickly placing their TNT and retreating into the nearby woods. Techno fires a flaming arrow, and they retreat further as the boom sweeps across the land. It's important that it's deliberate looking – to sow as much discord and argument among the residents as possible. Furious cries start to emit from the nearby houses as they loop around the buildings and make for the prison. They leave it until late at night – to give people time to gather everyone together and yell at each other, he assumes, and then make their way into the front door of the prison.

From there, it's really surprisingly simple. Sam is taken care of swiftly and silently with the aid of invisibility potions, tied up and tossed into the locker room after having his pockets rifled through. It takes them a minute to figure out the complexity of the prison's access card systems, but through trial and error (and Phil's patience preventing Techno's frustration from getting the better of them) they start to make progress.

They come to an empty line of cells, but Dream is nowhere to be seen. Techno furrows his brow in confusion, but Phil presses on. He's starting to get a pit in his stomach now, as they travel further and further into the blackstone tunnels. They discover a courtyard, a place with flowers and grass, and most importantly, a small gap at the top. They almost miss it, but thankfully a fat droplet of rain hits Techno in the face, prompting him to look up.

‘Well, that would have been a hell of a lot easier to get through.’ Phil grumbles. Techno nods.

‘It’s definitely our way out, though.’

They continue on, utilising their fire resistance potions where necessary. It’s incredibly well built, Techno acknowledges, but any security system is only as strong as the human element, as they’ve proven.

Eventually, after a long walk and lots of doubling back and arguing about key cards, they find the lava wall, and know they’ve reached their destination. The lava drops, and it’s a long way across, They agree that this is more suited to Phil than Techno, although he had wanted to go himself. But Phil has the advantage of wings that could take him across the gap if necessary, and Techno is a stronger fighter, should they be interrupted in their rescue mission.

Once the lava has fully drained, he can see a figure in the distance, held in a suspended obsidian box if he squints. It’s definitely Dream – the green of his hoodie is unmistakable, even at this distance. Phil steps onto the platform and it clunks across the fiery lake below him. Techno pulls the lever that drops the netherite blocks, and Phil enters the cell. Techno can see he holds his sleeve over his nose, and watches as he crouches down at the back of the cell.

He’s nervous, he realises. This prison is more inhumane than he could have imagined – a bare obsidian box, not even a bed to sleep on, it looks like. Techno bristles with anger at the audacity of whoever runs this place – Sam, he assumes.

He’s got conversations to have with certain members of the SMP, and he doesn’t think they’ll be friendly.

Chapter End Notes

kudos and comments always appreciated!

Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

A rescue mission

Chapter Notes

Hello! Hope you enjoy. For clarity, Wilbur and Tommy are Phil's adopted sons, Wilbur is dead but there's no Ghostbur in this story. Tommy also never got stuck in prison in this version.

Warnings are: descriptions of injuries, vomit

Dream's pretty sure his brain has finally, completely, lost the plot. There's basically no other explanation for why he's staring at Phil, a foot and a half away from him, at this moment in time. He's still pressed into the corner, hands held up near his head defensively, as he peers through his matted hair in shock.

What the fuck?

He's barely spoken three words to Phil in his life. What could he possibly be doing here? If he ranked everyone on this server from most to least likely to come into the prison, Phil would be at the very bottom.

He's holding one hand over his nose and mouth. It takes Dream a moment to realise it's because of the smell; he supposes he's become desensitised to it over the months. His other hand is held out placatingly, palm open and facing down, like he sees Dream as a wild animal.

That's probably what he looks like, Dream realises.

Phil is here on behalf of Quackity, Dream concludes. Nobody else has been to visit him in months, and now, on the one day Quackity doesn't visit, Phil does? An impossible coincidence – he's been sent here for a reason. The idea that his usual torturer is ill, or even dead crosses his mind, and it brings simultaneous relief and panic. Quackity is, in a weird way, safe. Not safe, actually, just expected. Not many surprises anymore; his torture methods vary, but the outcome is nearly always the same – injuries that he can put to the back of his mind once the initial pain has ebbed.

Exceptions apply, the scar on his collarbone reminds him.

Phil is new, and new means unpredictable. He didn't know that Phil and Quackity had a relationship, but obviously things have changed in his absence. He cringes down as Phil inches closer to him. He hears Phil mutter 'What the fuck.' under his breath, and it makes him feel sick. He closes his eyes, bracing for pain. The silence stretches out unbearably, until Phil speaks again.

'Dream? It's...it's Phil. We got your letter.'

Dream doesn't know what Phil is talking about, and he doesn't care. He just wants it over with. His shoulders hunch farther up. He hears Phil walk back to the lava entrance, and hears him shout something indistinct. Dream risks a glance, which turns into a stare when he realises the lava hasn't been replaced, and the netherite barrier is still down. *What's going on? Who's Phil yelling to?* His brain supplies dozens of questions in a matter of seconds, and he has absolutely zero answers for any of them. He's completely lost, still half convinced this is a hallucination. Phil turns back around, and approaches. Dream drops his gaze again. This time Phil comes even closer, crouching down to his level. He reaches out to touch Dream's shoulder, and Dream flinches away.

'Holy fuck, what happened to you?' Phil breathes.

What an odd question, Dream thinks, a coherent thought appearing through the haze in his brain.

'You gotta...Dream, we're here to get you out. But we gotta go quickly. Can you...can you look at me?'

At last, an order. Something Dream knows what to do with. He meets Phil's gaze. His eyes are watery, Dream realises. Another unusual thing. Why would Phil be...crying?

Phil takes a shaky breath, and closes his eyes for a long second, before speaking again. His voice is quiet and trembling.

'We gotta go, can you...can you walk?'

Dream nods. His Achilles tendon still creaks and shoots pain up his leg, but recently he's been able to put pressure on it. And Phil's ordered him to walk, so walk he will.

Phil reaches out to touch him again, but seems to change his mind once he sees Dream flinch again. Dream wants to apologise, to grovel even, but he's not been told he can speak. Phil leads the way to the edge of the platform, and Dream follows, limping and trailing one foot. His body is extremely unhappy with him, and the pain of holding himself upright almost makes him pass out. Tears spring to his eyes, and roll down his cheeks silently. Phil glances back at him, and gestures to the platform. Dream stares at him, and then the platform, and then back to Phil.

He's not been on that platform since the day he was imprisoned. If he had any hope that this was a genuine reprieve before, he sure as shit doesn't now. There's no way. It's a trick. Quackity is probably waiting on the other side, ready to beat him bloody for daring to leave his cell.

He shakes his head frantically. Phil looks horrified.

'Dream, it's okay. You're getting out of here, you're leaving. It's safe with us, we can protect you from...from whoever's been doing this to you. I promise.'

Dream stares at the platform. Somewhere, in the back of his consciousness, a tiny flicker of hope ignites. His legs are shaking with the effort of keeping himself upright, and he's just considering what to do when he hears a stressed voice from across the gap.

'Dream! Come on! We really haven't got all night!'

Dreams whips his head up. Through his blurred vision he can make out a figure draped in a red cloak and – yes, he can see his face now – it's Technoblade. His old rival, friend, training partner paces the room across from his cell. Quackity despises Techno – this he knows for sure. After Technoblade gave him that scar on his face, here's no way they'd cooperate. And Techno was – is? – his friend.

The tiny flicker of hope grows just enough to give him the courage, the energy to step onto the platform in front of him. With a sigh, Phil joins him, and Techno pulls a lever, making the mechanism whirl into action. Dream risks a glance back to his cell as it grows further and further away. He wishes he hadn't. A tiny, dark room, and you can't see the bloodstains from here.

Once at the other side of the lava, Dream takes his first shaky steps towards what he hopes is freedom, and promptly falls flat on his face at Techno's feet. He's exhausted and in pain, and barely lucid enough to comprehend it when Techno picks him up gently, and puts him over his shoulder, moving smoothly through the interior of the prison. Dream gently grasps onto the back of Techno's cloak. It's soft.

He's barely even aware when Phil gathers him up in his arms, and flies him up, up to the roof, through the roof, and his face is hit with a shockwave of cool air that fills his lungs with joy and pain simultaneously. He hears Techno enderpearl up, just as a splash of rain hits his forehead, followed by more all over his face and arms. It's one of the best feelings he's ever felt.

He opens his eyes a little, just enough to take in the night sky, beautiful and filled with stars. There is no lava, no glowstone here, and the lack of light pollution means he can see the constellations in all their burning glory. He's outside. He never thought he'd be able to take in this sight again. Even if this turns out to be an elaborate trick, a long play by Quackity to demoralise him even more, it will have been worth it for this one moment. He looks until he can't keep his eyes open any longer, and passes out a moment after they close.

Two shadowy figures, a third held in one of their arms, make their quiet way deep into the icy tundra, navigating by those same stars at first, and then heading for the pinpricks of light from lanterns they'd lit that morning to help them find their way.

Technoblade feels murderous as he exits the spare room, where he and Phil have deposited a very grimy and brutally injured Dream. They gave him a healing potion, and the visible cuts have been seen to, but the rest will have to wait until he's conscious. Techno feels an overwhelming urge to either punch something, cry, or do both at once. Instead, he lets out angry huff after angry huff, and paces the kitchen in a state of vitriolic fury, while Phil sits at the kitchen table with a mug of tea clasped in both of his hands, sporting a thousand-yard stare. They don't talk for a long while.

Techno needs to know who's responsible for this. He and Dream were never the closest, but they *were* friends – good ones at that. And irrespective of their history, nobody – *nobody* – deserves to be treated the way Dream clearly has been.

He's an anarchist. This is the very opposite of what he stands for.

The torture that Dream has been put through is inhumane. *'It's a miracle his brain still fucking functions,'* Techno thinks furiously. Eventually Phil finishes his tea, and stands up, which brings Techno out of his rage spiral and back to real life. He sits at the table, and watches as Phil refills his mug with water, and returns to his seat opposite Techno. They lock eyes for a second before Techno can't keep it in anymore.

'I'm going to start taking canon lives, Phil. This is...' He shakes his head. 'How long has this been going on? Since winter? How many months of torture has he gone through?'

Phil grimaces.

'I wouldn't be surprised if it's been since winter, yes.'

Techno unbraids and rebraids some loose strands of his hair repeatedly while he stewes in his rage. His fist thumps the table.

‘Calm, Techno.’ Phil says gently, placing a hand on his forearm. ‘You can’t be yelling and stomping around him. I don’t think that’ll help him feel safe.’

Techno breathes a deep sigh, and leans back. Phil is right, of course. He tends to be with matters like this – he has a knack for approaching problems sensitively, where Techno would much rather be brutal and to the point. He assumes it came with raising Wilbur and Tommy, both of whom had troubled childhoods until Phil took them under his wing. Now that Techno thinks about it, the skills Phil learned in that process might end up being most useful here – not that Dream is a child in any sense, but in that he has been deeply, deeply hurt, and it will take every effort to make him believe that he won’t be again.

Phil stands up, and pulls a bowl out from under the counter. While it fills with water, he pours in some soap and then leaves, returning a moment later with one of the good towels – a soft one – and a set of pyjamas that Techno recognises as Wilbur’s from before he died.

Techno raises an eyebrow.

‘He’s covered in blood and vomit. I’ll leave this by his bed, so when he wakes up, he can clean up a bit.’ Phil explains, tossing the towel over his shoulder and turning off the water flow. Techno watches as he leaves the room.

He’s relieved that Phil’s here to help, because God knows what he’d do if he had to take care of this alone. The plan hadn’t even been to take Dream back here, let alone nurse him back to health. He’d assumed that Dream would have machinations in place that he’d want to return to as soon as possible. Instead, he could barely walk 50 feet without collapse, and seemed scared of anything that moved.

For the umpteenth time that night, Techno wonders what the hell happened to him.

Phil returns, closing the door gently. ‘He’s sleeping. He looks quite peaceful,’ Phil says quietly, ‘but he’s so thin. We might need to ease him into eating food again.’

So he was starved too. Techno groans, and rubs his face. He can’t cope with this information right now. He’s exhausted. All the adrenaline has finally run its course through his body, and he’s ready to pass out. He says as much to Phil, who nods understandingly, and tells him to go to bed.

Techno drags himself across to his cabin and up the stairs to his room, taking off his cloak and jewellery as he does. He collapses, face first onto his mattress, unconscious before he can so much as get under the covers. It’s been a long day, and tomorrow, he hopes, will bring better news and a living third occupant of his little hamlet.

Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Dream wakes up, and Phil has some realisations.

Chapter Notes

Hope you enjoy! Comments and kudos always appreciated, let me know what you think! Still going for shorter chapters with frequent updates as that's what works for my writing style :)

warnings: mentions of torture, abuse

Dream sleeps for nearly two full days. Techno starts to get concerned that he's somehow slipped into a coma without either of them noticing, but the water glass on the bedside table needs refilling twice a day, so they conclude he's drifting in and out of sleep and drinking water in his more awake moments. They leave out food too, cheese and bread, but it goes untouched. They check on him hourly in the day, and although they *say* they leave him be at night, Techno bumps into Phil at four in the morning as they both attempt to poke their nose round the door without the other knowing. Phil scolds him for being awake so late. Techno simply looks him up and down, and raises an eyebrow.

It goes on for long enough that when he does lift the latch on the spare bedroom door, to be met by a pair of very wide, very scared, green eyes, it almost jumpscares him. They make eye contact for a long moment, Techno's jaw hanging open slightly as he figures out what the hell to do. Dream is sitting against the headboard with both knees tucked under his chin, and arms wrapped around his legs. *He looks like he's trying to make himself small*, Techno thinks.

Dream looks like a deer in the headlights until he breaks their gaze, squeezing his eyes shut, turning his face away from Techno and the door, breath audibly quivering. Techno feels a pit in his stomach form. He still hasn't said anything. He's useless at this. He clears his throat, and enters the room fully.

'Hey, Dream...' He tries nervously, fiddling with his hands.

Dream's gaze snaps back to him. Techno takes a step forward, and Dream lets out a terrified squeak, a tiny noise from the back of his throat that makes Techno want to burn the whole world down for doing this to his friend.

This is not the Dream he remembers.

The Dream in Techno's memory is boisterous, and arrogant to a fault. He had challenged any opinion he felt he should, regardless of the consequences for him. He'd been intimidating, the first time they'd met, shaking hands at a small tournament years prior. Dream seemed totally in his element, joking, and heckling the other competitors with just enough real criticism for them to play into mock offence. Even from behind an impassive mask, he was the centre of attention. Techno

wonders what happened to that mask. He hadn't seen it on the floor of the prison, but then again, he didn't get a proper look at Dream's cell.

He's seen Dream's face before, but he looks gaunter now, with sharp edges and dark circles under his eyes, despite his marathon sleep.

'Can you hear me?' He asks, before remembering that Dream responded to his shout across the lava back in the prison.

Dream nods once.

'I don't-I'm not- I'm not going to hurt you, Dream. I'm your friend. You're safe now. I don't know how much you remember, but Phil and I came to rescue you. Nobody knows you're here.'

Dream's eyes widen.

'We're in Phil's house right now. There's water and a towel, and some pyjamas, if you wanted to get out of those...clothes.' Techno trails off at the end, losing even more confidence in what he's saying. He sucks at this.

After a tense moment, Dream nods, and cautiously reaches over to the water bowl, eyes flicking back to Techno every few seconds.

Techno can't do this.

'One-one second, Dream.' He forces out, before turning and exiting the room swiftly. He takes the stairs in a few long strides and turns into the kitchen, where he's greeted by the back of Phil's head as he stirs the soup he has on the stove.

'He's awake.' Techno says bluntly. Phil's head whips around to face him.

'Is he okay?'

'He's not talking. I don't know why.' Techno mutters.

Phil's eyebrows crease together in concern. He brings a comforting hand to Techno's shoulder, rubbing his arm with his thumb.

'Are you okay?' He asks, voice quiet.

Techno shrugs. No, no, he's not okay. He's not coping with this very well at all, in fact. He had assumed that once Dream woke up, it would be easier. Dream's always been tough, resilient and brave in the face of adversity. Techno's seen him beaten in combat, even been the one to strike the final blow, but Dream had never been fazed. Surprised, perhaps, maybe a little embarrassed, but he was a gracious loser and always congratulated his opponents warmly.

Seeing him timidly staring across the room at Techno, watching silently for any sign of aggression, is not even in the same universe as Techno's concept of Dream.

He smiles grimly at Phil.

'Yes, I'm okay. Just surprised. And I'm not really sure what to do.' He confesses.

Phil nods, and turns, ladling soup into a bowl. He hands it to Techno.

'Here. Bring him this. It might go down easier than bread and cheese. I'll run him a bath while he

eats.' Techno takes it, and gives Phil a thankful glance. He picks up a spoon and makes his way back up the stairs, taking a deep breath and knocking on the door lightly.

'It's me, I've brought soup. It is okay if I come in?'

He waits. Silence. Oh. He's not replying. Obviously, he isn't replying. Techno scrunches his eyes up.

'You can...clap, or cough or something if it's okay for me to come in. I can leave it outside, if you prefer?'

Silence. Techno's about to bend down and place the soup on the floor and then jump out of a window when he catches a quiet but distinct clap from inside the room. He almost drops the soup in relief.

He opens the door slowly, hoping not to scare Dream with a sudden movement. Dream's position is almost unchanged, but his legs are crossed now. The water is dark brown and murky, but grime still coats Dream's skin. He's clearly tried to wash, but's barely made a difference. The pyjamas lie untouched on the chair where Phil had left them two nights ago.

Techno tries to make himself smaller and less threatening as he approaches, but Dream still cringes back slightly anyway. He holds out the bowl with a slightly forced smile. 'Here you go, it's carrot and coriander, I think.' Dream hesitates for a split second before reaching out and taking the bowl from Techno's hand. Their fingers don't brush. Dream stares at him for a moment, before glancing at the soup, and then back at him, with an expression that Techno can't quite place. *Oh*. He realises. *He's asking for permission*.

'You can eat.' He says softly, and Dream immediately picks up the spoon. As he digs in, Techno perches on the end of the bed, facing the window to the mountainside, and watches the sparrows whizz by in an attempt to settle his brain, which is feeling an awful lot of emotions all at once. The spoon clatters into the bowl, and he glances over. Dream has devoured it in a matter of seconds, and he sits, looking guiltily at Technoblade, with the empty bowl still in his hand. Techno takes it from him with a smile.

'God, you inhaled that!' He says, trying to convey that he's pleased without coming across as frantic.

A smile passes across Dream's for a split second, but Techno catches it. *Thank god*, he thinks, *an emotion that isn't fear*.

'Phil's run you a bath, if you want one.' Techno offers. 'It's warm water, so it'll be nicer than that washcloth.'

Dream hesitantly nods again.

'Follow me then, I'll take you to the bathroom. Phil's is much nicer than mine, you're lucky.'

Dream's eyes widen and he tenses, nodding frantically, and Techno can hear his breathing pick up. Fuck.

'No, no you're not...you're not...you're welcome to use the bathroom whenever you want. I didn't mean lucky as in... you know what, I'll just let Phil take this. Come on.' He picks up the pyjamas from the chair, and walks to the door as Dream pulls himself out of bed, and follows him.

Techno leads him down the stairs, Dream's footsteps almost inaudible behind him. He opens the

door to the bathroom, where Phil is turning off the taps.

‘Well timed,’ Phil comments, as Techno peers around the door ‘is he coming?’

‘Yeah, Dream?’ Techno turns. Dream is three feet behind him, leaning against the wall awkwardly, clearly trying to take weight off his foot. Techno wants to have a look at it, at some point – it seems like a bad injury.

Dream doesn’t move when Techno gestures. His eyes are filled with fear, and he glances between Techno and the door repeatedly.

‘You can go in.’ Techno encourages, and Dream takes an uncertain step forward, clearly stressed. He brings his hands across his torso, fiddling with his hoodie, and then Techno twigs what he’s worried about. It makes sense, he supposes, Dream probably doesn’t remember Phil gently placing him into the bed and covering him with a duvet. To Dream, Phil is as good as a stranger.

‘Phil, come out.’ He says quietly, and Phil looks up from drying his hands.

‘Oh, yeah, of course.’ He exits the steamy bathroom and backs into the corridor, away from Dream.

‘Sorry.’ Phil smiles at Dream. ‘Take as long as you want. There’s soap and shampoo in there already.’

Dream stares at him with wide eyes and nods, before dropping his gaze again. He sidesteps into the bathroom. Techno gives him an awkward thumbs up, and goes to close the door, but Phil stops him from pulling it to completely.

‘Just going to leave it unlocked, Dream. There’s a key in your side if you want to, but nobody’s going to bother you. Have a nice bath.’

There’s no response. Techno and Phil share a glance, and mutually decide to leave him to it. They sit at the kitchen table, in awkward silence for a few minutes, before Phil clears his throat. ‘This is...unexpected.’ He states, carefully. Techno raises his eyebrows.

‘Understatement.’ He responds dryly.

Phil stares out the window, eyes slightly glazed. There’s another long silence, while Techno engages in a fruitless trawl through his memories of the last few days.

‘The cell was fucked, Techno.’ Phil says quietly. Techno turns his head to listen. ‘It was... it smelled like a slaughterhouse. There was blood everywhere, up the walls...’

Techno is silent.

‘The water pool was pink. Nobody was taking care of him. There was rotting food, and-and-‘

Phil swallows.

‘-and he clearly expected someone else. He wouldn’t let me touch him. He looked at me like I wasn’t real.’ Phil finishes. He slowly stands up and walks to the back door, opening it, and sitting on the doorstep, resting his chin in his hands and staring out into the frosty forest in front of him. The sky is cloudy, merging shades of grey and white, and Phil’s breath mists in the air in front of him. Techno takes a seat next to him, and Phil’s wing curls around his shoulder a moment after. Techno raised an eyebrow quizzically.

'It's cold. You're still in your pyjamas.' Phil's voice had the slightest tremor.

'I didn't even realise.' Techno murmurs. He leans into Phil's shoulder gently, resting his head on it, and the wing shifts to enclose him further.

Phil clears his throat. 'I don't know what your plans are, Techno, but I'm staying here. He needs – he needs help. He needs someone to look after him, or he's going to waste away. I can't-'

Techno closes his eyes as Phil struggles through the sentence.

'I can't watch it happen and do nothing about it.'

Phil sniffs. He doesn't often cry, Techno knows, but when he does, it's almost always when something reminds him of Wilbur. He can see Phil is holding back tears – his face is tilted upwards, towards the cold sky, and he's breathing deeply. He keeps his head on Phil's shoulder.

'Of course I'll stay, Phil.' Techno says quietly.

And there they sit, gazing into the landscape, side by side, as tears silently track down Phil's face. Techno realises that Phil must see so much of Wil in Dream. They had both been ambitious, competitive, and occasionally underhanded. And they'd both craved power, and eventually, it had been both of their undoing, too.

A second chance, Techno thinks. This time, he and Phil could stop history repeating itself. Wil had been detached, isolated and in pain, and when he self-destructed, he had brought the whole of L'Manberg with him.

He had deserved better. And so does Dream.

Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

A glance in the mirror, and a discussion of supper.

Chapter Notes

Hey! Thank you so much for the lovely comments, I really appreciate every single one <3

This chapter was fun to write, hope you enjoy!

warnings: contains mentions of torture

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The bathwater is grey. Dream had drained and refilled it once already, but even the second soak had barely been enough to shift the dirt and grime he'd accumulated over the last months. Now he had managed it though, it was incredible just how much better he felt. His hair was still a matted mess, caked with dried blood that he couldn't get out without a comb, but he'd deal with it the next time he was allowed to have a bath. He pulled the soft pyjamas on, and god, he didn't think it was possible to feel so much more comfortable.

He'd taken a lot of care to clean up his wounds as gently as possible – he definitely had a few broken ribs and fingers, but most of his cuts had been cleaned up for him, he had noticed. He didn't know who to thank for that, but he would once he worked it out. He was just towelling off his hair when he caught sight of his reflection in the mirror hanging on the back of the door, and his stomach dropped.

He looks like a corpse.

Dream raised his hand to his face slowly. Is this really what he looks like now? His cheekbones are prominent, and his eyes are ringed in dark circles. He has a fading bruise over his left eye, red capillaries spreading like a cobweb over his eyelid. He has a new scar, running from the bottom left of his jaw, all the way to the corner of his mouth. He remembers Quackity looming over him, knee in his chest to keep him on the ground, tracing his jawline with his pocketknife. Everything about his face looks sharper, older, like someone has chiselled away any softness he had remaining. Dream closes his eyes and looks away. He doesn't recognise himself.

He opens the bathroom door, towel hung over his neck and swamped by the pyjamas that he'd been given. The sleeves and legs fall long past his limbs, and he's had to tie the cord tightly around the waistband. He shoves the sleeves up to his elbows, and cautiously approaches the kitchen.

Dream's scared – he's not sure who or what to expect here - but he's not in the prison anymore, and that can't be a bad thing. He'd been in a state of total confusion when he woke up – so shocked that he wasn't in his cell that he'd thought it was another dream.

It was only once he'd felt the cool breeze from underneath the door caress his face, when he'd

heard the clinking of someone pottering around in a kitchen, that he'd begun to believe the unthinkable.

Techno had got him out. It had really happened.

And then he'd been offered food! Soup, not potatoes, and a spoon to eat it with. He had nearly cried then. He didn't deserve it. He didn't deserve the warm bath, or the cosy clothes, or the soft bed he'd been given, Dream knew this. But he was so tired, and it was so comforting and safe. He'd just have to make it up to Techno and Phil later, he decided.

As he came around the corner, he could see the silhouettes of his hosts, sitting on the doorstep. He stood awkwardly and silently behind them, unsure what he was meant to do. He shifted his weight, making Techno's ears prick up. He turned, making Dream freeze involuntarily. He felt like he'd been caught doing something, and he could feel his heart speed up, but Techno's eyes were kind, and he smiled across the room at him.

'Hey Dream. How was your bath?'

Dream relaxes minutely, nods, and smiles. Techno is his friend.

'You look better. I bet it feels good to get all that shit off you, right?'

Dream nods again. Both Techno and Phil have stood up, walking into the kitchen, Phil closing the door behind them. When Phil turns, and sees Dream standing there, his eyes go glassy, and his hand goes to his face for a second. Dream worries he's done something wrong, but Phil interrupts his thoughts.

'You...you are looking better, yeah. Sorry about the...the clothes, they're the smallest we have. They were Wil's.' His voice is a little gluggy, and Dream wonders if it might be the first time anyone has worn them since Wilbur's death.

'Glad they're getting some use.' Phil smiles, and turns to the stove. 'Sit down, do you want tea?'

Dream nods cautiously, and takes a seat at the table, Techno sitting diagonally across from him.

'I need to take a look at some of your injuries, by the way, Dream.' Techno says quietly. 'Not right now, of course, but today would be best. Healing potions can only do so much, you know?'

Dream stares. He'd been given a healing potion? That explains why he was feeling so much better. Why...why would Techno waste such a valuable resource on him?

'Oh, also, here.' Techno passes him a notepad and a pencil from the counter behind him.

Dream takes them, confused. What was this for?

'Since you're not speaking at the moment. I don't know what's-what's going on with that, Dream, but if you want, you can write things to us.' Techno explains. Dream is even more confused. Did Techno...? Oh.

It dawns on him.

Techno is his friend.

Of course Techno wouldn't think of it because that's not how friendships work. Friends don't need to give each other permission to speak. Logically, Dream knows that.

But if nobody's given him permission...

Here's the thing - speaking is dangerous. The only occasion he'd spoken without Quackity's permission, he'd had his shoulder dislocated and the arm tied behind his back for three days, so he couldn't pop it back into the socket.

Then Quackity had made it impossible to speak for a while. The pinprick scars around his mouth twinge at the memory.

He hasn't spoken in months now. He doesn't even think he can remember what his voice sounds like. The idea fills him with fear – even when he was alone in his cell, he couldn't bring himself to vocalise anything. Just how deep has Quackity burrowed into his brain, that his influence was still holding him down now? Dream knows he needs to hear it, needs to hear Techno and Phil tell him he can speak before he allows himself to.

He shakes slightly as he took the pencil.

'Thank you for the bath and the food.' He writes shakily. His raw fingertips ache from the dextrous movement, but most of his nails have grown back now, so it's bearable.

Techno smiles widely, and then immediately tries to hide it. Dream gets a warm feeling as he watches Techno struggle to keep his face neutral. While Techno put an apathetic face forward to most of the world, Dream had spent hours training, talking, playing games with him. He knew better. 'You're more than welcome, Dream.' He says, a little gruffly, and clears his throat.

Phil takes a seat at the head of the table, and passes a cup of tea to Dream, who waits until Phil's hand withdraws before taking it. Another habit he's probably never getting rid of.

Dream writes another thank you note for the tea, and Phil nods in response. It smells warming, and floral, and it nothing like anything he'd had in prison. Nobody tells him to drink though, so he just appreciates the smell for the time being.

Dream takes the pencil again.

'I can't stand up for very long right now, but if you give me things to do, I'll try my best.'

The two men opposite him share a glance.

'You don't need to do anything, Dream, you're recovering.' Techno says gently. Phil doesn't reply, just looks at Dream with a sad expression.

Dream looks at his tea. He doesn't believe him.

He can feel Phil's eyes on him as he fixes his gaze on the tea leaves that have settled at the bottom of his cup.

'You can drink, if you want.' Techno says quietly. Dream nods gratefully, and takes a sip. It tastes as flowery as it smells, and it's sweet, too. He wonders if Phil has put honey in it. It soothes his throat and nose as he swallows, and then sets the cup down.

'It's good, thank you Phil.' He writes.

'No problem mate. Help yourself to anything from the kitchen, anytime.' Phil replies with a

reassuring but strained smile.

Dream nods again. The concept of coming and taking food from the kitchen is...strange. He feels a bit overwhelmed by the prospect of having that much choice – choice to eat whatever, whenever, wherever.

‘I normally skip breakfast, but Phil and I eat lunch and dinner together most days, if you want to eat with people.’ Techno says helpfully, and Dream nods vigorously. *That sounds human*, Dream thinks, *that sounds social, and friendly, and nice*.

He’s very, very lucky that Techno and Phil took pity on him. He takes another sip of tea, and stares through the window, while Phil and Techno get into a discussion about what to eat tonight. Phil wants steak sandwiches, and Techno wants chilli and rice. They bicker in a very friendly manner – no real harshness behind any of the words. It feels domestic.

‘Do you have any preference, Dream?’ Phil asks, after a minute or so of him and Techno going in circles.

‘Anything but potatoes.’ He writes down, and Phil nods.

‘No potatoes, alright. Techno’s through with his potato growing phase I think anyway, he’s moved onto selectively breeding wheat.’ Techno rolls his eyes at Phil’s words.

‘That’s an overstatement. I’m doing what any farmer would do, and only choosing the best yielding crops to reseed...’

Dream tunes him out to a background noise, happy to simply exist for a moment, in friendly company, with a warm mug of tea, and a view of the forest. While it’s just experiencing the small joys of life, he thinks, it’s also a lot like coming home for the first time.

He supposes that’s sort of what he’s done. Watching the swallows swoop and dive, catching insects mid-flight, he feels a little more like himself. He can feel the fog in his brain begin to thin a little, exposing parts of him he’d long forgotten about.

Phil and Techno agree on chilli tonight, and steak sandwiches tomorrow. Dream continues to slowly drink his tea, shifting his sore fingers around the hot ceramic of the mug.

Later that day, he sits on the porch step, arms hugged around himself, and just stares at the grey sky, watching the clouds slowly drift by as the wind bites at his exposed face.

He didn’t see the endless, restless sky for six fucking months.

He can feel tears dripping down his cheeks as he mourns the lost time. He could have been outside with his friends, playing manhunt and building new structures. He wonders if Sapnap, Karl and Quackity have got married yet. He wonders if Bad is still consumed by the egg, or if they’d managed to defeat it, now the server is able to work together without him antagonising them.

He hopes Tommy is okay. He spent hours thinking about what he did to Tommy before he’d been imprisoned. Exile, the discs, all of it seems like a faraway dream now, another universe. They’d been so consumed with such small things, and Dream had been so fucking cruel.

Tommy had provoked him – there’s no doubt there. He’d zeroed in on Dream’s attachments – George, Spirit, his server, and pinpointed them as weaknesses with incredible accuracy. Dream didn’t deserve what Tommy had done, he knows that, but Tommy didn’t deserve what Dream had done either.

Dream shivers. At least Tommy had got his revenge, he supposes.

His mind wanders for a while longer, before, predictably, settling on George. He misses George the most out of everyone. He can remember the last time they spoke, a week or so before the confrontation with almost the whole server, when he'd been led to his fate by people he thought he could trust.

'You're not you, Dream.' George had said, his hand on Dream's cheek as his voice caught in his throat. 'The Dream I know would never do this.'

Dream had laughed scornfully at the time, but George pressed on.

'You're not okay, Dream, you're ill. You're not making any sense, you're always talking to yourself and I don't think you've gone to bed in about three days. Please, Dream. We can leave, we can go somewhere new, far away. Just for a while. Just until you feel better.' George's eyes were pleading. Dream felt something within him falter, just for a second, exposing a crack in his resolve. If only he'd paid more attention at the time, maybe he'd have recognised it as his last chance before things went terribly, irreparably wrong.

Instead he'd brushed it off, and wallpapered over it without a second thought. He'd seen the tears form in George's eye when he rejected him, and had to look away.

George, the only person who'd seen through the façade Dream put up. George, who'd loved Dream enough to try to fix him rather than writing him off as a monster.

He hoped George didn't hate him now. Because even though it would be deserved, and even though George would be within his rights to spit on him, Dream isn't sure his heart could take it.

Chapter End Notes

comments and kudos always appreciated!

Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

A revelation for Techno and Phil, and a quality of life adjustment for Dream.

Chapter Notes

hello!! thank you so much for the comments recently, I read every one and they genuinely make my day. I've been nervous about writing fic for literally years so I'm really glad that people are enjoying it <3 anyway here's the next chapter, it has some delicious hurt/comfort.

warnings: mentions of torture

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The next major improvement to Dream's post-prison life comes in the form of a question.

'Is-can I-can I ask Dream, why aren't you speaking? Did something happen to your throat?' Techno queries, cautiously. Dream tenses. Here's where it could all fall apart. He's pretty sure that Techno's curiosity has finally become unbearable for him, because normally Dream's speech (or rather, lack of it) is neatly skated around during conversations. He doesn't know what will happen if Techno denies him permission. That...that would hurt. A lot.

It's two evenings later, and after another two marathon sleeps, Dream is sitting in an armchair at the living room table, blanket around his shoulder, watching as Techno lights the lantern that hangs above them. Phil's shuffling a deck of cards on the tabletop for his and Techno's evening card game, but stops when he hears Techno's question. Dream can feel both of their eyes on him.

Slowly, he picks up the pencil. 'I'm not allowed to speak.' He writes, and then holds it out to Techno.

He and Phil read it. Then they reread it. Dream can see their eyes scanning the line over and over.

'Who told you that?' Phil queries, voice strained.

Dream shakes his head. That's another of Quackity's rules – he's not allowed to tell anyone.

'Dream, you can speak. I-we, you can speak any time. All the time, if you want to.'

Tears are beading in Phil's eyes, and the sight of it makes Dream scared. He's upset his host. Quickly, he grabs the pencil again.

'I'm sorry, I didn't mean to make you angry.' He glances at Techno, who's staring at the paper with fire in his eyes.

'I'm not angry, Dream!' Phil says, with exasperation in his voice, which makes Dream flinch back. 'Oh, God.' Phil breathes, standing up and walking to the fireplace, facing away from the pair at the

table. Dream's gaze switches between Techno and Phil rapidly. He's so confused – what has he done?

'You can speak, Dream. Nobody will hurt you for speaking.' Techno murmurs.

'Is that permission?' Dream writes hesitantly. Quackity had been very particular about his wording.

'Yes. I give you permission to speak.' Techno whispers.

Dream nods, relieved. He feels like this should be a bigger, more dramatic moment. Instead, it's just a bit sad. Techno looks horrified, Phil looks furious, and Dream...Dream honestly feels a bit scared to even open his mouth. He does anyway, because he thinks it'll help Techno feel better.

'Thank you.' He rasps. His voice sounds like shit. He supposes months of disuse interspersed with screaming will do that to your vocal cords. He shivers a little, almost expecting Quackity to come bearing down on him at any moment.

'You-you really shouldn't thank me for that.' Techno forces out, voice tense. 'You really don't need to.' Dream can see he's trying to swallow down emotions for Dream's sake.

'I wasn't allowed to in...in there.' He explains, wincing as his vocal cords unstick themselves after months of neglect.

'Why not?' Techno says bluntly. Phil gives him a look. 'You don't have to talk about it, if you don't want.' He hurriedly adds, and Phil rolls his eyes.

'It's okay. I think...I think he just got bored of me speaking. I was too loud, a lot of the time. And I'd talk back. He didn't like that very much.' Dream's voice is already starting to go, becoming weaker.

'You'd be too loud, and talk back, while being tortured?' Techno intones. Dream flinches slightly at the harshness of his words, but nods.

'That's disgusting. That's foul.' Techno's eyes are narrowed, and Dream is even more nervous now.

'I'm sorry.' He tries lamely, hoping he will be able to calm him down.

'I'm not-it's not- nothing about this is your fault, Dream.' Techno breathes. Dream stares. He isn't sure why he apologised, but it was probably just habit – deferring to the angry person in the room tends to be a safer bet.

Techno looks calmer now. He very slowly reaches across the table, towards Dream's hand, which is still holding the pencil. Dream flinches back, making brief and accidental eye contact with Techno. He looks angry, and sad, and Dream is not sure exactly what's happening.

'Can I touch you?' Techno asks.

Dream doesn't know what to make of that. He's not been asked for permission to be touched in a long time. He hesitantly nods once, because Techno looks so *sad*, and he doesn't want to upset his friend. Techno takes his hand, very gently in his. The touch is soft, barely any pressure. Dream realises with a hollow feeling that this is probably the first time he's been touched without pain since he went into prison, all those months ago.

'Nobody is ever, ever going to do anything like that to you, ever again. Not if I have something to

do with it.' Techno speaks lowly and seriously. And Dream...Dream doesn't believe him. But for the first time in god knows how long, he feels like he might, one day.

He sniffs. It turns into a sob. Dream clings onto Techno's hand like a lifeboat he's been waiting months to be thrown, tossing in a turbulent, violent ocean. Techno's thumb gently rubs against the back of his hand. It feels like a grater, his nerve endings fried by constant pain, but he doesn't want it to stop, not yet.

Months and months, with no hugs or friendly bumps on the shoulder. He was affectionate, before all of this, it came easily to him. Does anyone know about what happened? Or has Quackity kept it under wraps? Dream forces the thought away. Not right now. He's not thinking about him.

Dream and Techno stay like that for a few minutes longer, until Dream's tears stem and he starts hiccupping, much to his embarrassment. Techno smirks, and Dream smiles back, slightly self-consciously.

'Is it okay if I go to bed?' Dream asks in a murmur, glancing at Phil quickly. He's still leaning heavily on the mantelpiece, head down. Techno nods, and stands up.

'Of course. Come on, I'll take the plates out of your room while we're at it.' Dream follows his broad figure as he climbs the stairs in front of him. Techno holds the door, and Dream slips into the bedroom silently. He awkwardly sits on the bed, unsure whether to help as Techno gathers up the crockery from the room.

'Get into bed, stop stressin'.' Techno intones, not even looking up. A subtle warmth fills Dream's chest as he does as Techno says, clambering into the bed and bringing the covers up to his chin. He didn't know just how much he missed the feeling of being cared for. Now, he doesn't know what he'd do without it.

He's not just thinking about his time in prison, of course, but the months prior to that too.

He'd be lying if he said all the emotional turmoil of the last two days hasn't worn him out – his eyelids are drooping already, even though it's barely 9pm, according to the clock on the wall.

A clock.

Another small pleasure he'd missed dearly. He realises now just how disorienting being in a windowless box with no way of telling the time was. He wonders if Techno or Phil have a watch he could borrow.

A clanking sound brings his attention back to the present. Techno has all the crockery now, and lifts the latch on the door.

'Do you want me to leave it pulled to, or can I close it properly?'

'Open a little bit, please.' Dream requests in a tiny, scratchy voice. Techno nods.

'Sleep well. I'll wake you up for breakfast.'

And with that, he leaves Dream to sleep in peace, in a soft bed with feathered pillows and duvet around him.

White evening light seeps in through the window. The air is fresh and cool in his lungs. Dream feels a million miles from his cell as sleep gently pulls him under.

Unbeknownst to the inhabitants of the snowy cottages, back in the SMP, not far from the prison itself, someone is gathering together a rucksack, filled with fur lined clothes, dried meat, and snowshoes.

Chapter End Notes

as always, kudos and comments appreciated

Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Dream's letter makes a reappearance.

Chapter Notes

hi! hope you enjoy, this was one of my favourite chapters to write so far :)

As always, comments and kudos appreciated.

warnings - mentions of torture and injuries

Dream's eyes are closed in bliss as a hand gently combs through his hair. He's cross-legged on the floor, in front of Techno, who's seated on a stool with a comb behind his ear as he meticulously demats Dream's hair with practised ease. Ten days have passed since Dream woke up in Phil's spare room, and things have made a definite, clear improvement. They've dealt with his open injuries, which have mostly healed up at the surface level, courtesy of Techno's healing potion stockpile. His bones, however, are still causing problems. His ribs still ache, although there's not much to be done about that, and his fingers have only recently had the splints removed. Overall, he's much more mobile – his foot seems to have responded excellently to the potions, leaving it weak but relatively pain free. He can walk without that leg dragging now.

He still doesn't like to be touched much, but when he's in the right headspace (and often a little bit sleepy), he'll let himself lean on Techno's shoulder as they watch Phil bustle about, cleaning up the kitchen, or making up food for the birds. They haven't held hands since that first time, but today he finally conceded and let Techno brush out his disgusting hair, and that's progress too, he thinks.

Phil had offered to cut it, but quickly regretted it when Dream descended into a half panicked, half terrified state, backing into a corner with wild eyes and clawing at his head. It had taken half an hour of gentle words and the scent of floral tea to eventually pull him back to the present. Even then, he'd had residual adrenaline for hours after, putting him even more on edge than normal.

He'd explained, afterwards, that *he* had used a pair of sheep shears to chop off his hair more than once while he'd been in prison, and it hadn't been a gentle experience.

He still couldn't bring himself to say Quackity's name. He wasn't sure what Phil and Techno assumed about the identity of his torturer, but they had made it clear that whoever it was, they were in for an unpleasant ride once the opportunity for that sort of thing arose.

They still haven't seen the brand on his collarbone, and Dream is nervous for the day they inevitably do. They'll know about Quackity then.

Techno's hands rub his scalp gently. He's being incredibly careful, Dream knows. Techno could be delicate when he wanted to be, but as Dream feels the tips of the man's fingers run through his hair, he knows an extra effort was being made at his expense.

He feels guilty for it, but every time he apologises, or tries to help out around the house, he's greeted with stern assurances that he doesn't need to do either, and in fact, it would make them feel better if he just let himself be looked after.

While his friendship with Techno was swiftly falling into a comfortable niche, Phil was another matter entirely. Dream is grateful to Phil – of course he is – but he's wary of him too. Phil is a seasoned warrior, and the extent of his relationship with him is almost entirely contextualised through Technoblade.

He doesn't think that it helps that he's working his way through Wilbur's wardrobe, seeing as they're the only clothes that fit him in the house. On more than one occasion, he's seen Phil double take when Dream enters the kitchen, as if he can't believe who's just walked through the door.

Maybe Phil's ears were burning, because a few seconds later, he walks into the living room with a bowl of carrots, which he sets down next to Dream.

'Snack for you two. We need to get through these carrots before they go bad.' He says warmly, and Dream opens his eyes.

'Thanks.' He says, smiling, and reaches for one. He crunches on it as Phil settles down in the armchair next to the bookshelf.

Moments like this are nice, but really only happen when Techno is around too.

There's a flutter as Phil opens his book, and a piece of paper flies out onto the floor. Phil frowns, reaching down to pick it up, before his expression clears.

'Oh! Dream, it's your letter, with all the cryptic clues in it.' He smiles, holding it out. Dream furrows his eyebrows, and reaches for it. 'No! No moving.' Techno insists through the comb in his mouth, and Dream sits back obediently.

'What letter?' He asks quietly, as Techno gently tilts his hand back.

Phil looks to Techno, who's too focused on Dream's hair to share in his confusion. 'The one you sent from prison?'

Dream shakes his head, making Techno tut. 'I wasn't allowed to send letters.'

'I mean,' Phil pauses, and speaks carefully, 'do you think it's possible that you don't remember?' His voice is gentle, but Dream frowns.

'He would never have let me send a letter.'

'Do you want to have a look at it?' Phil offers, and Dream nods. 'Can you read it aloud?' He asks quietly, hesitant to ask a request of Phil. 'It's just...' He gestures to Techno.

Phil laughs lightly, and starts to read.

'Dear Technoblade.

It's been a while. I hope life's been treating you well. I'm sending this note to let you know that I'm in a sticky situation, and could use your company. You remember the prison, I'm sure – let's just say I've become intimately familiar with it in the last few months, and I'm growing rather bored of my current position. Do me a favour, come and visit? It'll relieve me of some boredom. I miss my sparring partner.

Dream.'

Phil finishes, turning the letter over to make sure, and then folding it up.

Dream's now even more sure that he didn't write it. It's close, but it's not his writing style. He'd probably have given the clue about his sparring partner, but the rest of the hidden meanings are quite transparent, no fun for Techno to work out, and too easily deciphered by other parties.

'I didn't write that,' Dream repeats. 'I'm sorry.'

Techno's started listening now. Him and Phil make eye contact, and share a concerned and dubious look.

'Dream,' Techno says seriously. 'That letter is how we knew you needed help. We came to get you because of that letter.' Dream doesn't like how Techno is speaking from behind him – it makes him nervous, and he shivers. He moves his head off Techno's lap, and shifts so he's sitting on the floor away from Techno's chair.

'I-I don't know what to tell you, I'm sorry.' Dream murmurs, bringing his knees up to his chest. He's hypersensitive to changes in atmosphere now, but not always able to decipher what caused them.

Techno softens immediately. 'I'm not- I'm not angry, sorry Dream. I'm just confused. If you didn't send me this, who did?'

Dream shrugs slightly, still looking down obediently. He doesn't know any more than either of them do.

'You know what this means, right?' Phil asks. 'Someone else wanted Dream out of prison.'

Techno turns to look at him, face blank as he processes the new piece of information. From the floor, Dream is confused.

He *really* doesn't know what to do. He can't for the life of him imagine that anybody would not only want him out of prison, but go so far as to elaborately fake a letter from him in order to get Technoblade to break him out.

But someone did.

He wonders for a second if somehow, he had managed to send that letter, and had forgotten it in the bloody haze of torture. But he dismisses it almost as quickly. Not only would he never have had to opportunity to send a note, but he also wouldn't have forgotten about the only chance he would have had to escape.

'It's someone who knew you weren't able to send a letter yourself. And someone who must be aware that conditions in the prison aren't humane.' Phil remarks. 'Did anyone visit you in prison?'

Dream shakes his head.

Techno leans forward in his chair, elbows resting on his knees and fingers steepled.

'We can work this out.' He says, eyes narrowing, and Dream can tell he's about to start listing off people when Phil catches the pale, scared look he has on his face.

'Or, we could not, right now.' Phil suggests gently.

Dream shakes his head minutely. He doesn't want to sit here and systematically run through how much each and every person outside of this room hates his guts, and was happy to leave him to rot in a windowless torture chamber for the rest of his life.

With one exception, apparently, and even then, he's sceptical.

The revelation that somebody else orchestrated this breakout from behind the scenes screams 'ulterior motive'. He sincerely doubts anyone did this out of the goodness of their heart – more likely, somebody else is planning some sort of coup, and wants his combat skills on their side.

Well, more fool them, Dream thinks callously. He'll be lucky if he ever regains his full range of motion, let alone ability as a warrior. Even aside from his Achilles tendon, his fingers have lost much of their fine motor skill, a result of being broken and set poorly over and over again.

Maybe a sword or an axe, once he's fully recovered, but he doubts he'll be able to hold a bow at full tension ever again.

And then there's armour – heavy, chafing armour against his ever-painful ribs and shoulders? Maybe if he modified it, but certainly not any time soon.

Dream suddenly feels overwhelmingly tired. The new information about the letter has emptied his already depleted energy levels. Despite his nervousness, he shuffles back over to Techno, glancing up at him for permission before leaning against his legs. A hand gently winds its way through Dream's hair, still damp from the detangling attempts earlier. Techno continues to very softly remove the knots and small mats that remain, and Dream can hear him and Phil speaking in low voices, but he's not listening.

Someone, out there, knows more than they are probably pretending to. Someone knows exactly how he escaped, and probably where he's residing now. And if that information exists, then Quackity and the Warden might eventually come across it. He feels like he's been dropped into the middle of a game he doesn't know the rules to, with his life at stake. It's terrifying.

Dream takes a deep breath, and tries to stop thinking about it.

After ten or so minutes, the calming motions of Techno's hands in his hair, combined with the soft noise of their conversation eventually lulls him into a half-asleep state. He feels Techno's hands leave his head, and he pouts slightly at the loss of contact.

'Bedtime I think, Dream.' He hears Techno chuckle.

'I'll sleep here.' He replies through a yawn. His limbs feel like lead.

'You can't do that, you'll fuck up your back. Do you want me to carry you?'

Dream considers it for half a second, before conceding and nodding. He just wants to be warm and safe, and if Techno wants to carry him upstairs, that's his business.

Techno lifts him up with the utmost care, and Dream sighs, leaning into the warmth of his chest. He's carried up the stairs to his room, and gently set onto the bed. Techno closes the curtains, and then turns to face Dream, who's wiggled under the covers.

'Anything you want before I go?' He asks, fondness in his voice as Dream looks at him through half open eyes.

After a second, Dream hesitantly holds out his hand. He isn't sure why – maybe it's because today

has been confusing, and he's realised just how much he's missed human contact. Maybe it's because he's subconsciously remembering the comforting times he would sleep in a dogpile with George and Sapnap when they camped out on cool nights. Maybe he just wanted to know that Techno was there.

Whatever the reason was, when Techno takes his hand, a warmth spreads in his chest, and it helps him drift into a sound, deep sleep.

Techno stays for a while, gently holding onto Dream's hand, and trying his absolute hardest not to cry over what had just happened. He watches Dream's chest rise and fall, a sense of protectiveness befalling him as he takes in how calm Dream looks in his sleep. He almost doesn't want to leave, but after a few more minutes, his own tiredness gets the better of him, and he gently lays Dream's hand down on top of the duvet. He sneaks across the floor, leaving the door cracked slightly to let the light in.

Thousands of blocks away, a figure dressed in a black winter coat is making their way through a birch forest, the prison disappearing in the distance behind them. They huff in the cold air, checking their compass, before wrapping their scarf a little closer to their face, and shoving their hands in their pockets as they walk. They carry a rucksack laden with supplies for a few days travel, but they're hoping they'll reach their destination before they use it all up. The moonlight illuminates them as they tramp through the leaf litter, kicking up mulch as they do. They're not worried about being followed – nobody will even know they are gone.

Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

A nightmare, and a watchful forest.

Chapter Notes

Hi! I'm really enjoying reading everyone's theories about who's on their way through the forest :) Here's a new chapter, maybe it'll help further some of your theories.

Also, thought I'd share that my tumblr is gendermen.tumblr.com, if anyone wants it! I'm v happy to chat on there + am relatively new to dsmptumblr so feel free to send me a message!

No warnings this time, enjoy :)

Two nights later, Techno is woken up abruptly by a bloodcurdling scream from somewhere outside his cabin. He practically falls out of bed, heart pumping at a million miles an hour as he scrambles to grab his sword and bursts out of the door. He can hear more cries from Phil's house, and now he's closer, he can recognise the sounds as Dream's voice. He nearly trips over himself as he sprints up the stairs and barges through the door, sword drawn, blood racing and ready to tear whoever is hurting Dream to shreds.

It takes him a second to take in the scene before him - the tip of his sword wobbles, and is then lowered. Dream is writhing in the bed, eyes open but glazed and unseeing. He's having a nightmare. Phil is already here, shushing Dream gently and whispering calming words. He glares at Techno, who withers under his gaze, and he suddenly feels remarkably embarrassed at his reaction. He leans his sword up against the windowsill, and then closes the door behind him. He cautiously approaches the bed, in which Dream is still thrashing around.

He watches as Phil gently rubs Dream's shoulder, repeating that Dream is safe, and he's with Techno and Phil. After a few minutes, Dream seems to calm down, movements becoming less violent, until his eyes flick open with a sharp intake of breath.

'Shh, Dream. It's okay, you're okay. It's Phil.'

Dream looks panicked. His eyes are searching the room but not focusing on anything, and he's pushing the covers away from him, but his movements are gradually getting slower and less frantic, until eventually he sits up.

His lungs are heaving but he seems to be okay. Techno still doesn't know what to do. Phil has backed off now that Dream's calming down, and the room is silent except for Dream and Techno's heavy breathing.

Dream looks up after a minute, recognition in his eyes as he identifies Techno and Phil in the dawn

light, and Techno can see his shoulders slump in what he hopes is relief.

‘Sorry.’ Dream stutters, wiping the sweat from his forehead. ‘I didn’t-I didn’t think they’d carry on, now I’m out.’

Techno feels a familiar pit open in his stomach – the one that always appears when Dream alludes to something that happened in the prison.

‘It’s alright, mate.’ Phil says soothingly. ‘We’ve all been there. Techno used to slash up the curtains with a sword when he had nightmares.’ It draws a small huff of laughter out of Dream, so Techno forgives Phil for sharing that particular piece of information.

‘I always replaced them.’ He replies, and Phil and Dream smile in response. Dream sinks back into the pillows with a soft whump.

‘Do you wanna talk about it?’ Phil asks gently, and Dream shakes his head. ‘I think I just want to go back to sleep.’ He looks wrecked, and even though it’s nearly morning Techno is glad he’s chosen that option.

‘It’s nothing new. Had this one every night for a week once.’ He grimaces. Techno scrunches his eyes up, and keeps his emotions to himself, because even he can recognise that neither crying nor punching a wall would be helpful. Instead, he reaches out his hand, tentatively.

Dream looks up, and glances between Techno’s eyes and hand for a moment before nodding, and taking it. He gently tugs, pulling Techno to shuffle up to the head of the bed, and Dream arranges himself so that his head is laying in Techno’s lap. Techno’s hand finds his hair, and he props a pillow between his back and the headboard to cushion himself.

Phil smiles at the sight. His job finished, he dusts himself off and goes to leave, but before he can take a step, his wrist is caught by Dream. He’s clearly nervous about it, Phil can see by his wide eyes, so he turns slowly.

‘Yeah, Dream?’ He asks, voice soft.

Dream doesn’t say anything, and he doesn’t have to. Phil nods and smiles, because of course Phil will stay. He settles into the chair by the bed, still holding onto Dream’s hand, and watches as Dream slowly drifts off again. And then, once he’s sure that he’s asleep, Phil and Techno share a silent moment of eye contact. It’s not ideal, but Phil’s overwhelmed that Dream chose to place such trust in him.

Techno stays, pinned to his spot by the snoozing Dream, but Phil heads downstairs after a few more minutes. He goes about his daily routine – filling up the kettle, grinding coffee beans, cleaning up the stickiness on the table from last night’s dinner.

Once again, Dream has reminded him viscerally of his son. Wilbur was prone to nightmares too, going through month long phases of disturbed, violent sleep. Phil had always been there, gently holding his shoulders and trying to gently bring him back to reality. He’d never known much about Wil and Tommy’s life before he took them in – frankly, he hadn’t really wanted to. Whenever it was brought up, it made both of them withdraw instantaneously, and made Phil feel insanely guilty. They’d been 11 and 9 when he found them, huddling under a gutter in a city far away from the SMP. Wil had been quiet and brooding, whereas Tommy had been suspicious and fiercely independent. Neither of them asked for his help, and neither of them wanted it. But he hadn’t been able to get the pair out of his mind.

Eventually, after weeks of gaining their trust, he'd been able to convince them that his house had a spare room, and they'd be silly not to use it until they found somewhere else to be. And that was that, really.

The nightmares had started a year or so after. Tommy seemed to be immune, but Wilbur's sobs had wracked through the house regularly until he'd flown the nest two years ago, taking Tommy with him on a new, exciting adventure.

Phil knows how that turned out.

Dream occupies his mind again. Phil's not surprised that he's started having nightmares – in fact, Phil would have been very surprised if he hadn't. Dream had also shared precious little information about his experience in prison, but his body language told Phil enough, as did the scars. He tries to wave away comparisons to Wil.

He turns his attention back to chores – but as he does, he notices something more sinister. He's just refilling the bird feeders when he catches something in the corner of his eye. It's only there for a second, but Phil sees it. An unfamiliar movement – something out of place in the forest landscape. Too quick, too deliberate, too human. Phil's eyes narrow as he scans the treeline, searching for any sign of a non-animal presence.

He sees nothing. But that doesn't mean nothing is out there, observing him as he squints into the shadows of the pine trees. It fills him with worry. Phil trusts his instincts, and goes back inside, locking the door behind him. He immediately goes up to Dream's room, where Techno has sunk down to lie next to Dream. They're talking quietly, and Phil is glad to see that they're both awake. Dream looks better, too, his hair has unstuck from his forehead and his expression is less guarded and scared.

'Phil?' Techno queries, with a hint of tension in his voice. Phil knows that Techno knows that something is wrong. They've lived together long enough for him to pick up on subtle changes in his demeanour like that.

'I don't want to worry you both, but I'm pretty sure somebody is in the woods.' He says, opting for bluntness and speed over caution.

Dream's eyes go wide with panic. His gaze shifts from Phil to Techno and back frantically, sitting up in bed and drawing the covers up under his chin.

Techno also sits up. 'You're sure?' he asks, and Phil nods.

'It could be a wandering trader, or a villager who's strayed too far and got lost,' he supplies, 'but equally, it could be someone who's found out that Dream is staying here.'

Dream's shaking now, just a little, eyes now glued to the window, as if a face is going to appear through it.

Techno has his hand resting on Dream's arm, but he's looking at Phil intensely.

'Nobody on this server is stupid enough to try and do anything outright. If they're watching the house, they know we're both here. It's not going to be an all-out assault, that's almost certain. More likely, if they are here for Dream, they'll try to take him without either of us finding out.' Techno muses out loud. His hand tightens on Dream's arm. 'Sorry Dream, looks like you can't go out on the porch for the moment.'

Dream nods seriously. Phil's noticed that when he's stressed, Dream retreats to silence. He

assumes it's a learned behaviour from prison.

'They'll show themselves sooner rather than later.' Phil says, trying to be comforting. 'And we can assess whether we need to move on from here when they do.'

Dream nods again. Phil watches as he pulls the covers off, and walks to the window, closing the curtain.

'Good idea.' Techno remarks. 'Now, lets talk about plans...'

The three of them spend the rest of the day passing around ideas, like whether a complex system of bells attached to the doors would be a useful trap to catch any unwanted night-time visitors, or if it would simply make Phil trip and fall flat on his face as he goes to the bathroom at 2am.

Other conversations revolve around the integrity of locks in the house, whether they should fashion rudimentary deadbolts for the doors, and if the windows need reinforcement.

One measure that was agreed upon immediately is that Techno should move into Phil's cottage for now. Even if he'd vetoed it, Phil suspects Techno would have simply not gone to bed after their evening socialising in Phil's living room, so it would be pointless. Not that Phil wants to veto it – it's comforting to know that Techno is only a few rooms away. Phil's a reputable fighter for a reason, but Techno is in a league of his own, and their experience working together in combat makes them unparalleled as a team.

Dream, of course, is no pushover either. In his prime, he was as skilled and dangerous as Techno, and even through his injuries and the months of neglect he suffered, he's still extremely agile. Now he's eating well, both his muscles and brain are regaining their once formidable prowess.

Phil suspects he could hold his own against most of the individuals on the SMP, if he had to, even in his recovering state. Dream is at his strongest when under pressure, Phil remembers, and there is no pressure greater than the threat of being taken back to the prison – Pandora's Vault, as he's recently learned it's called. He's sure Dream could be off into the forest, and disappear into the landscape in a matter of seconds.

Aside from that, they implement a knocking system which changes each day. It's simple – each of them only has to remember two knocking patterns – one for 'Hello, it's me, can I come in?' and one for 'Lock the door, something might be happening.'

They keep a close eye on the forest. The mountains are nigh impassable, and they assume whoever is out there isn't trying to die by tumbling into a hidden crevasse or freeze by falling through the deceptively thin ice that covers the lakes up there. Phil spots two more things that confirm what he already knew.

The first is a footprint in the snow, right at the forest's edge. He nearly misses it, but as he goes to harvest yet more carrots from their farm, he spots it, the brown pattern of the forest floor rapidly becoming covered in snow.

The second is more worrying – it indicates that the intruder is observing them right back. His attention was caught by a flurry of crows flying up, startled by something. That's when he notices the top of a pine tree shaking, and not from the wind. Somebody is climbing it. Phil strains to see a hint of colour among the dark branches, but he can't make anything out.

It's very intense, to know that someone is out there, hidden, waiting.

After the first restless night, Techno moves into Dream's room, and they start locking the bedroom

door. Phil has a key too, of course, hidden in the hollow section he'd carved out of the top of his bookcase for this exact purpose.

They feel better with the new arrangement – Techno, paranoid as ever, doesn't have to keep getting up to check on Dream, who, no longer alone in his room, is okay with locking the door.

They try their best to eat what they have remaining in the pantry, as opposed to hunting, or gathering new ingredients. Phil makes a nice vegetable (mostly carrot) soup, Techno attempts to make some sort of beetroot mash, and while it's okay, they all agree it needs refining. Dream, out of nowhere, produces one of the nicest stews Phil has ever had – he's roasted the last of the beef with lots of garlic and herbs until it's tender, and then mixed it in with some vegetables that he sweetened slightly with honey. Techno practically eats his whole portion in one mouthful, and scrapes the pot out at the end too. Phil would have joined him if Techno hadn't been a *bit* possessive over it.

Dream learns to braid Techno's hair, and while it's good for rebuilding the strength in his hands Phil thinks practically, it's also, definitely, a step forward in Dream's confidence. They sit, chatting happily as Dream plaits his hair into increasingly complex patterns, while Phil reads in the armchair, one eye on the book in his hands, and one eye watching as the two men talk. It's amazing, Phil thinks, what progress Dream has made, in the relatively short time he's lived with them.

He's developing a very intense fondness for Dream, which is something he wouldn't have predicted a month and a bit ago when they first got that letter. He's a Dad, what can he do? He spent years looking after Tommy and Wil after he took them in. It was only supposed to be temporary, until Phil found them a family or home willing to have them, but just like with Dream, he'd got attached to the pair very quickly.

Dream reminds him of how they'd been, back at the beginning. Untrusting and nervous, but clearly searching for comfort.

Phil is trying incredibly hard not to turn this into a redemption for how he'd failed Wil. He doesn't deserve to be forgiven, and he doesn't deserve to forget how he had abandoned Wil and Tommy to a new world, letting them self-destruct while he swanned off, sating the wanderlust he'd been harbouring towards the end of Wil's childhood.

This isn't a redemption, or a way of assuaging his guilt, no. This is Phil trying his best to be better. Do better.

Dream asks to braid his hair that evening. Phil lets him, of course he does, and Dream creates a tiny plait, at the nape of his neck. Phil keeps it in for as long as he can, and when it does eventually come undone, he asks Dream to redo it.

They keep watching the forest, and the forest keeps watching them back.

And in the end, the cold war between the inhabitants of Phil's cottage and *the person outside* comes to a head, both sooner and more simply than anyone anticipated.

They're playing whist in the living room, a game which involves sticking an unknown card to your forehead and making bets as to whether you have a better card than the ones you can see on the other's foreheads.

Techno and Phil are in the middle of an intense staring match while Dream watches. They're trying to discern anything in the other's facial expression that could clue them into the right decision. It's

particularly funny for Dream, who can see both of their cards, and knows they have almost the same.

Phil squints at Techno, who furrows his brow.

‘I’m going to win.’ Phil announces triumphantly, and slams his card down onto the table. It’s a 3 of clubs. He looks horrified.

‘Hah!’ Techno crows, and reveals his 4 of clubs. He double takes, and then they both look at Dream, who places down the 7 of spades with a smug smile.

‘This is bullshit.’ Techno moans, and rocks back in his chair. ‘That’s not even- the maths of that doesn’t even make sense!’

Dream shrugs, and gathers up the cards. He’s midway through shuffling when a noise from outside the window makes all of them freeze in place. It was a sneeze – a human sneeze, Dream recognises. The curtains are drawn, but Dream starts to shrink into his seat anyway, the broad back of the armchair shielding him from potential view. All three of them glance towards the door, and remain still for a moment longer, before Techno jerks his head towards the stairs up to Dream’s room. It’s a clear signal, and Dream silently but swiftly creeps across the floor, ghosting up the stairs and into the bedroom, followed by Techno, who locks the door behind them.

Neither of them sit down. Dream’s heart is pounding, and he’s battling a panic attack, he realises, as he gulps deep breaths through his mouth. Techno remains by the door, sword drawn and muscles tense. He silently holds out a dagger to Dream, having pulled it from his belt. Dream takes it. It’s light in his hand, but sharpened to an invisible point. Dream knows he could do damage with this.

As soon as Dream and Techno disappear upstairs like shadows, Phil goes about concealing any sign that more than one person lives here. He deposits the mugs in the sink, covered by soapy water, and hides the cards down the middle of the sofa cushions. He’s grateful that they’d cleaned up after dinner in good time. Then he sits, and waits, axe by his foot, and hands gripping the edge of the table.

As he expected, after another minute, three knocks rattle on the door. He twitches, and then stands up, bringing the axe with him as he silently goes to the window, and moves the blind back slightly. He can see a solitary figure on the doorstep, hood up against the cold.

He makes his way to the door, and calls out to the intruder.

‘Hello?’

‘Hi.’ The person responds.

‘Can I help you?’ Phil queries, voice light.

‘Are you Phil?’

‘Yes.’ Phil replies, tightening his grip on his weapon.

‘Then yes, I think you can help me.’

The voice from outside pauses.

‘I’m here to see Dream.’

Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

The eyes in the forest are revealed.

Chapter Notes

Hey! This was by far my favourite chapter to write, so I really really hope you enjoy it!! Thank you all for the guesses, I really hope you like what I chose to do with it :) also a bit more prison life exposition, because I know we all love it. If you want to please leave comments! I read every one even though I don't reply, and I really really appreciate them <3

warnings: descriptions of torture

Phil takes one deep breath in, and out again.

‘Dream? Isn’t he in prison?’

The voice is silent for a long moment.

‘I think he was broken out by Technoblade, and possibly you, actually.’

Ah. Phil can feel the adrenaline pumping through his muscles. *Here we go.*

‘What makes you think that?’ Phil inquires coldly, listening for the reply intently. It’s a windier than usual today, so he is struggling to make out the words through the thickness of the wooden door.

Meanwhile, upstairs, Techno and Dream can’t hear anything at all of the stranger, and no words of Phil’s, just the lower tones of his voice. They’re sitting on the bed now, both coiled and tense, as they desperately listen, trying to pick out any clues as to what the next few minutes will hold.

‘If we need to,’ Techno murmurs, ‘We can get out through that window, and be gone in seconds. I have enderpearls. Phil’s got his wings, he’ll be fine. We’ve got options.’

Dream nods. Techno’s words are a comfort to him, as he considers his uncertain future. He feels like his head in on the chopping block already, just waiting for the executioner to do his job.

The idea that Quackity could be there, *right there*, only a few feet from him, leaves him shaking and silent.

Techno reaches out his hand a little, as an offer, and Dream takes it, gripping his hand tightly. It’s a comfort, and a promise of safety.

All is quiet for another minute, except the vague sound of Phil’s voice. And then, *then*, to their

horror, Dream and Techno hear the front door open.

Techno stands up silently. He moves to the door, standing to the side of it with his weapon drawn. He gestures to Dream to go to the window, and Dream does, knife held flat against his forearm and up his sleeve. It fell into that position naturally, years of training guiding his muscle memory.

There's more silence. Dream thinks his heart might beat out of his chest if this goes on longer. He can see Techno is on tenterhooks, knees slightly bent and tensed. It's unbearable – he's almost willing something to happen so that they can get on with it.

They hear footsteps climbing the stairs – Techno tilts his head, listening, and his eyebrows furrow, confused, until he hears a knock. It's the one they'd decided on that morning, the one that means 'Can I come in?'

Techno and Dream share a very bewildered look, and Techno stays silent, unmoving until the knocks sound again.

'It's me.' Phil's low voice sounds through the door. Techno visibly relaxes. Dream sucks in a breath desperately.

Techno cracks the door, still paranoid, and glances through, before opening it wider, and letting Phil in.

'It's okay – it's not – listen, you'd better come downstairs, both of you.' Phil sighs. 'I think it's okay. I don't think he's here to hurt you, Dream.'

He.

Techno and Phil lead the way, Dream following them a few steps behind as his brain whirrs, concocting and dismissing a thousand scenarios, trying to predict what's about to happen. There's only a few people that Phil would let in – people who (as far as they know) wouldn't have a reason to hurt him. He's shaking as he steps off the stairs, and follows them into the living room, and there *he* is. Leaning against the table. *His* hair is messy, probably from the hood of the coat which Dream spots hanging over the back of Phil's chair. *His* hands are tucked under *his* arms, probably trying to warm them up against the freezing night-time air *he'd* walked through to get here.

Dream's throat has closed up, but that's okay. He isn't sure he wants to speak – he's too busy taking in the person in front of him. *He* turns, eyes passing over Phil and Techno and onto Dream. *His* hand goes to *his* mouth as the two of them make eye contact.

He looks exhausted, and unkempt, and beautiful.

George stares back at him across the room.

'Dream.'

His voice is rough, again from the cold, Dream assumes. He hasn't heard George say his name in more than half a year, and it almost knocks him off his feet. George looks the same as back then. Perhaps he has larger dark circles under his eyes, and he's lost a bit of weight, Dream thinks, but the rest of him, from his dark hair to the crows' feet at the corner of his eyes, it's all exactly the same. Dream thinks his heart is about to burst, combust and shrivel up in his chest all at once. He can feel tears pricking at the corners of his eyes as blood pulses audibly through his ears.

'Dream.' He whispers again, taking a hesitant step towards him.

Techno takes a step between them, and gestures to the armchair.

‘Perhaps you should have a seat George,’ He intones, ‘and explain why you’re here.’

George’s gaze flicks between Techno and Dream, who still hasn’t moved a muscle. He concedes, and retreats to the armchair Techno is pointing to.

Dream cannot, will not, take his eyes off of George. He’s here. He’s real. If he wanted to, he could reach out and touch him, brush the hair from his eyes.

Does he want to?

Dream suddenly decides that he needs to sit down, because he’s feeling fucking faint and he wants to be closer to the floor in case he hits the deck.

He almost falls into one of the wooden chairs, gripping the edge of the dining table with white knuckles, almost painful on the fragile joints in his fingers.

George is still staring at him, eyes wide and almost scared. They dart over his form, and Dream realises with a pang that while George looks relatively similar to the last time they’d been in company, Dream looks wildly different. The burn scars over his arms, for a start, must look gruesome to someone like George, who’s never been one for engaging in combat needlessly, and avoids clinics like the plague.

The obvious slashing scars all over his shins, rising further up his legs and disappearing under the pyjama trousers he’s cuffed up to his calves. They haven’t faded since the day he acquired them, still blood red and raised.

The curling scar across his face, ruthlessly and slowly carved into him by Quackity, using the pocketknife Dream recognised as a gift from Sapnap.

(Sapnap had excitedly shown it to him the year before, with its oak and brass handle, engraved with S, K and Q in the blade. He had one made for each of them, as an engagement present.)

And his hands – Dream realises George is staring at them as they grip the table. His cracked and healing nailbeds, the scars between his thumbs and forefingers from where they’d been almost severed for holding Quackity’s arm away from his face. That was when he was giving Dream the pinprick scars around his mouth by sewing it shut with a thick needle and leather cord. The final part of his punishment for talking without permission. It had lasted for nearly two weeks before Quackity had forgiven him, and ripped out the stitches.

If George is horrified now, as his face suggests, at the sight of his injuries, Dream feels a little more hope that his theory that George didn’t know what was happening in the prison is accurate.

Techno breaks Dream out of his thoughts by leaning on the table, sword held tightly. ‘Why are you here?’ He asks coldly, suspiciously. George swallows, and turns his head to face him.

‘I...I’m here because I wanted to see Dream. I’m not a threat.’ He stammers out.

Techno huffs derisively. ‘How can we be sure?’

‘I thought you might ask that. I’ve already shown, um, Phil, but here.’ George produces a piece of paper from his trouser pocket, and offers it to Techno, who snatches it and opens it. Dream watches as his face goes from anger, to confusion, finally landing on extreme surprise. He looks up at George, who shrugs.

Dream takes the paper from Techno, who lets it go without a fight. He starts to read.

‘Dear Technoblade.

It’s been a while. I hope life’s been treating you well. I’m sending this note to let you know that I’m in a sticky situation, and could use your company. You remember-‘

Dream’s attention trails off. It’s the letter. THE letter, the one that prompted all of this. And George has a perfect copy, which is impossible, unless...

‘You wrote the note.’ Techno finishes his thought for him out loud.

George nods.

Phil, who has remained silent up until this point, clears his throat.

‘I, for one, think we should have a listen to what George has to say.’

As Dream’s heart catches up with what his brain has already worked out, the rush of emotions that courses through his entire body makes him feel like he’s on fire. *George is the one who wrote the letter. George is the one who drew Techno and Phil to his aid. It was George, it was George all along.*

Dream wants to cry. All that time he’d spent in the prison, hanging on to that tiny, flicker of hope, that George wasn’t complicit in his torture. That he wasn’t happily living his life, aware of the pain Dream was subjected to, day in day out.

George hadn’t abandoned him

Techno is clearly less confident. He begins the interrogation swiftly, and by implying that lying will result in George being relieved of one or more canon lives. George pales a bit.

‘Why did you have to trick me and Phil into rescuin’ him?’ Techno begins.

‘The prison is the best guarded building in the SMP. There was absolutely zero chance of me getting in, making it all the way through, and coming out again with Dream. I knew that you still owed Dream a favour, and I assumed that if he was able to, he’d be cashing it in.’ George explains quietly, fiddling with his hands.

‘How long were you watching the house?’ Phil asks, slightly less aggressively than Techno.

‘Two nights. I wanted to make sure Dream was here, and see who else was around too, and what was...happening. I-I heard screams, the first night I camped in the forest. I thought they were Dream’s but I wasn’t sure.’

‘It was a nightmare.’ Dream says quickly. He doesn’t want George to think that Techno and Phil are hurting him. George’s gaze shifts to him instantly, eyes still wide at the sight of him. The sound of his voice. George nods shakily.

‘I thought it must have been. It sounded like the ones you had when...before everything.’ He replies quietly. Dream’s brain supplies him with memories of George comforting him after long nights of fear, reliving battles and near deaths. Holding him as he dry heaved into his blankets, softly wiping the tears from his eyes. Back before he’d been scared of showing that vulnerability. They stare at each other for a long moment before Techno breaks the silence.

‘So you forged this letter, sent it, waited until we’d broken Dream out of prison, then walked all the way here, through the first snow of the autumn, watched our house for two days.’ He summarises.

George nods.

Everyone is processing something for a long minute, until Phil eventually speaks. ‘Dream? Can you come with me for a second?’

It catches Dream by surprise. He’s almost forgotten that Phil is here, he’s so distracted by George’s presence. He nods, letting himself be led out of the room by Phil. He glances back to George before the door closes, and their eyes catch each other.

‘Are you okay?’ Phil asks, concern evident in his tone.

‘Yes.’

‘Do you believe him?’ Phil queries.

Dream shifts uncomfortably – despite his soaring heart, he isn’t sure if this is all wishful thinking. If there’s one thing he’s learned over the last year, it’s that anyone can betray you. ‘What-what do you think?’ He asks quietly.

Phil pauses.

‘I think I do, yeah.’

Dream nods again.

‘Then so do I.’

Techno joins them. He raises his eyebrows, and breathes out heavily.

‘This is a turn up.’ He intones, leaning back against the door. All three of them are crammed into the stairwell, practically shoulder to shoulder. Dream feels overwhelmed, and clearly he’s showing it on his face, because Techno’s hand brushes his own and Dream grabs onto his sleeve tightly.

‘What do you want us to do, Dream?’ Phil asks. ‘If you want him gone, we can do that. If you want him to stay, we can do that too. It’s up to you.’

Dream blinks. *Another decision.* He’s really not used to having any sort of choice over how his life goes.

There’s always the chance, however much Dream wants to deny it, however much the evidence says otherwise, that George is here to drag him back. There will always be the chance, no matter who he’s talking about, until the prison is gone.

And yet. And yet, George has been here for *days*, knowing where Dream is. If he wanted Dream back in his cell, he wouldn’t have hung around after hearing Dream’s nightmare from the safety of the forest.

George is many things - apathetic, stubborn to a fault, but he’s never been cruel. He wouldn’t fake allyship with Dream just to betray him later. He’s certain of it.

‘I want him to stay.’ Dream whispers. He grips Techno’s sleeve a little tighter.

Phil nods. ‘Okay. That’s okay. He can stay in Techno’s spare room for the moment, and then, if

he's around for a while, maybe we can see about finally getting that extension done.'

Techno makes an affirmative noise.

'Can-can I be alone with him? For a minute?' Dream asks, hesitantly.

'Yeah, of course, Dream. We can wait in the kitchen. If you need anything – anything at all – just shout.' Phil reassures him. Dream nods distractedly.

He doesn't know what he wants, when he walks through the door to the living room, but he knows this is needed. He needs this. George's head turns to him as he comes through the door eyes wide and his mouth slightly open in surprise. He stands up, brushing himself off a little.

Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

A conversation on the floor of the living room.

Chapter Notes

Hello! Enjoy :) Also, don't worry, this isn't turning into a solely DNF relationship fic. There's still more Dream and Techno / Dream and Phil friendship content (and maybe some others too...)

As always, comments and kudos are much appreciated.

warnings: mentions of torture

George looks almost scared, taking a few hesitant steps towards Dream, who watches as he cautiously approaches, like Dream's an unpredictable animal.

'George.' He forces out, throat tight. He can feel tears at the corners of his eyes, stinging. He takes a step forward, and another until he and George are practically nose to nose. He can see George study his face, running his gaze over the scar on his jaw, the fading burn marks on his hairline. Dream just takes in the multitude of colours in his eyes. They're watery – Dream can see that he's on the verge of tears. George doesn't often cry, he remembers. They still haven't touched. And then, Dream opens his arms, just a little. And the dam bursts.

George falls into his chest, sobbing. His breathing is ragged, and he's squeezing Dream's torso like he never wants to let go.

It's real, Dream thinks, he's here.

The tears fall down his cheeks in rivulets as the pair sink to the floor, arms tight around each other. Dream buries his face into George's jumper, breathing in the familiar scent. It makes him cry even harder.

'I'm so sorry.' George whispers, over and over again, frantically.

Dream can't reply. His throat is too taut with tears.

The two of them sit there, on the floor of the living room, wrapped up in each other so intensely that they don't notice Phil crack the door slightly, take in the sight, and then close it again quickly, with a soft smile on his face.

After a few minutes, George takes a deep breath and loosens his arms. Dream does the same, and the two part, leaning back and taking each other in again. They hold onto each other's arms as if they're both scared the other will disappear if they don't.

Maybe Dream *is* a little scared.

'You look-you look...' George sniffs, trailing off.

'I look awful, don't lie.' Dream laughs wetly.

George hiccoughs through his giggle, and nods in agreement. 'You do.'

George reburies his head in Dream's shoulder.

'I missed you so much.' He whispers. 'I'm sorry it took me so long.'

Dream sobers slightly at that.

'Why-why did it take you so long?' He asks shakily. He almost dreads the response. He's scared of the judgement that could pour from George's mouth – that he deserved most of the torture, that he deserved to be locked up. That it was only the worst of it that was in excess.

George closes his eyes with a deep breath. He leans onto Dream slightly, and then lifts his head up.

'I went to sleep. After we had our argument, I just switched off. I think I hibernated, or something.'

Oh. Dream thinks. He hadn't even considered that. It was something that had always happened, but had become more pronounced in recent years. *George's lazy reflex*, they had joked. They'd never worked out exactly what causes it, but it was always more prominent and when he was stressed.

'I didn't wake up until six weeks ago, and I didn't realise you were in prison until I went to your house, and you weren't there. I cleaned it up a bit, by the way.'

Dream laughs lightly.

'I figured out what was going on with Quackity when I saw him coming out of the prison the next evening, with... his clothes were covered in...yeah. And he was muttering to himself. Sapnap and Karl seemed worried about him. Sapnap kept going to the community house roof and just sitting, alone, for hours and hours.'

Dream feels his breath leave his lungs when his torturers name hits his ears. He closes his eyes briefly. And Sapnap does know. That's not so much of a surprise.

It still feels like someone's cut open his stomach.

'None of them knew I was awake, I didn't want to see any of them, once I knew what they'd done to you. I came up with a plan. I used the books in your house to make the clues in the letter, and then I waited until Quackity stopped his daily prison visits. And now here I am.'

Dream struggles to piece together the timeline in his mind, but when he's sure he's fit the pieces together, he frowns.

'How did you know I was here?' He asks, eyebrows furrowed. 'Nobody knows where this place is, except for Tommy.'

George gives him a guilty look.

'I still have an enchanted compass from manhunt.' He admits, rummaging through his bag. He eventually produces it, glowing with a purple sheen.

'I..I hid it. So if you ever needed help, I could find you.' He says quietly. Dream turns it over in his hands, almost reverently. He thought they'd all been destroyed. He'd made every attempt to, back

when he was still in charge of the server. He'd hunted them down, aggressively demanding them from his friends. George claimed he'd lost his, which had almost sent Dream into a breakdown. They'd felt like weak points in his armour, negating all his stealth with a tiny metal arrow.

'We can burn it.' George offers. 'I know how much they scared you.'

They scared you. Dream is always knocked off guard by just how well George knows him. When he saw Dream was ransacking George's own house, searching for this lost compass for hours, he wasn't *deranged* or *tyrannical* or *paranoid*, George saw that Dream was *scared*.

'You kept it?' Dream croaks out. 'I was threatening you with canon death, and you kept it?' His heart is about to spill over into his chest and rise up his throat.

'I was worried you'd need help, and I wouldn't be able to find you.' George repeats, throat catching again. 'Dream, I could see you weren't okay. It was like something had taken over your body and squeezed all of *you* out. You were ill. I don't understand how the others couldn't see it. You needed help, not a prison.'

Dream blinks back tears.

He gently places the compass back into George's palm.

'Thank you.' He whispers. 'I don't deserve you.'

'I don't care what you think you deserve. You'll always have me, Dream.'

George's hand ghosts over his hair, tucking a loose strand behind his ear. He doesn't flinch. George's touch is soft, and slow. He leans into it.

The pair sit there for a while, on the dusty floor of Phil's living room. They don't talk much, just comments here and there.

They just exist together, safe in the warmth of the cabin, like they hadn't been able to for so long.

He can see George sneaking glances at the scars on his hands and legs. He wonders if George wants to know the stories, or if he's considering the best way to help Dream get rid of them.

He wonders what he'll think of the brand on Dream's collarbone. It's sunken a little now, not so raised and rough. Once Techno and Phil see it, the cat's out of the bag forever about the identity of his torturer. He's taken care not to let them.

George however, already knows – knows what Quackity was doing to him, saw what tools he was ferrying to and from the prison. There's none of Quackity's rules being broken if George sees.

It feels like a secret, weighing heavily on him, and all of a sudden, he feels on the brink of being crushed by it. He refuses to look at it in the mirror, refuses to acknowledge it when his knuckles graze it as he pulls on a shirt. It's a permanent symbol of what Quackity had done to him, beat and slashed and burned him into obedience for the sake of a few lines of information.

Almost of their own accord, his hands start to unbutton the collar of his shirt. George is confused – goes to speak, but Dream shakes his head.

'I want you to see something.' He murmurs. 'It's-it's a secret. But you already know, so it's okay. Don't-don't yell. Please.'

George looks apprehensive. Dream feels like his heart is about to expire with anxiety.

He shifts the neckline to the side, exposing the brand to the soft lamplight. George's hand goes to his mouth with a whimper. His other hand outstretches slowly, inches from Dream's skin, and yet Dream still moves back further.

'He did that to you?' George asks, muffled from behind his hand.

Dream nods. He lets go of his shirt, concealing the letter once again. *I'm crying again*, he realises vaguely. *So is George*.

'I haven't shown anyone else. They can't know it was *him*, it's not allowed.' Dream gets out, after he's managed to take in a breath.

'What do you mean, allowed?'

'I'll...it'll be bad, if they find out. It'll be bad for me.'

George looks horrified. Why does everyone do that, whenever *his* rules come up?

'Dream, you're not-don't you get it? He's never coming anywhere near you, ever again. He can't hurt you anymore.'

Dream looks down.

'They'll want revenge on my behalf. I don't want them to get hurt.' He mumbles. While that's part of it, he knows, deep down, it's because of the little voice in his head that makes him flinch. The one that still makes him swallow his words sometimes when he tries to speak.

The one he brought with him from prison, the one he may never be able to drag out of his subconsciousness fully.

George's hand on his arm brings him out of his thoughts. His voice is tinged with anger. 'I won't say anything to them if that's what you want.'

Dream nods.

'But he's evil.' George spits. Dream closes his eyes. He doesn't think Quackity is evil. He thinks Quackity is desperate, and scared, and proud, and traumatised. Just like everyone else on this fucking SMP.

Reducing that to 'evil' absolves everyone of guilt. Including Dream.

There's another minute of silence before George changes the subject.

'If it's any consolation, they've got absolutely no idea where you are.' George's tone is a little self-satisfied. 'Quackity and Sam had given up looking in the town by the time I left. I didn't hear anything they were talking about, obviously, but they were clearly out of ideas.'

The information brings Dream comfort. He's sure the search will continue, but it's good that they wasted this long scouring the urban areas.

'Is there a plan for me? As in, am I allowed to stay?' George asks after a minute.

Dream nods. 'Techno has a spare room.' He doesn't miss the slight disappointment that flashes momentarily across George's face. He knows what George was hoping for – they'd shared the bed

thousands of times over the years, and it had been where they became so close, in shared whispers under the covers.

But Dream's head is spinning enough as it is. Maybe in a few days.

'Do you want food? We have carrot soup.' Dream offers hopefully, wondering if they can offload some of their overwhelming carrot harvest onto George, but he shakes his head.

'I'm okay. I ate the last of my food this afternoon.'

Dream nods. 'How-how long do you think you'll stay?' he asks hesitantly.

'I've got seven months of lost time with you to make up for, Dream. I'll stay as long as you'll have me.'

Dream huffs out a laugh. 'Don't say that, you'll never go home.' He says, rolling his eyes.

And George just smiles softly at him.

They end up sitting out on the porch together, watching the stars appear as the overcast dissipates. George points out constellations that he knows Dream has already seen, and Dream nods along.

They sneak glances at each other furtively.

George asks about his mask. Dream alludes to Quackity ripping it off his face and burning it in front of him. George looks like he regrets his question.

Their pinkies brush, and then, a hesitant moment later, interlock. Neither of them acknowledge it.

Dream points out a fox as it trots along the treeline, clearly searching for a stray rabbit or bird it can snatch up for dinner.

George leans into Dream's shoulder, just a little. Dream leans back.

They sit together until Phil, concerned, opens the door and sternly tells them to come inside, because it's cold and dark, and it's been a busy day.

Before Techno leads George to his bedroom, they hug again. Not as tightly as the first time, but enough that the pressure remains a few seconds after they let go.

Dream goes to bed feeling a little more whole than the night before. A little more like the person he used to be, before the discs, before Tommy and Wilbur and L'Manberg.

This is being better, he thinks. This is doing better.

He can see, now, with a clearer mind and the benefit of hindsight, that perpetuating the cycle of dissent, tyranny, violence, and punishment will destroy this world, and the people in it.

He wonders if Quackity can see it. He wonders if he ever will.

Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

George screws up, a little bit.

Chapter Notes

Hello! Enjoy :)

warnings: mentions of torture

Techno isn't sure what to think about their newest arrival. It's starting to feel pretty crowded. Phil is quietly thrilled, he can see it on his face. And Techno should be too, in all fairness, but he can't shake the suspicion that things are about to start changing rapidly, much too fast considering Dream is still in the mid stages of his recovery.

The more people residing in their arctic refuge, the more noticeable they are. Maybe Techno is being paranoid, but he certainly feels a sense of unease whenever he remembers that George trekked directly from the SMP to here.

They still don't know exactly *who* they're protecting Dream from either, which is almost as worrying. It's a safe assumption that Sam the warden is out for blood, but Techno is sure he wasn't Dream's torturer. He doesn't flinch when they mention his name, and while he had clearly been corrupt, he always seemed to abide more by malicious compliance than outright cruelty.

Then again, he had presided over Dream as he was locked in an empty box for months, his only social interaction being with someone intent on tearing him apart, fingernail by fingernail, burn by burn. So maybe his cruelty had simply been in a different form.

And they still don't know *why* Dream was being tortured. It's easy to write it off as evil, pure and simple, but if there's one thing Techno has learned since moving to the SMP, it's that almost everybody has an ulterior motive. Everyone's got secret projects, everyone's talking to everyone in private. The only exceptions are probably him, Phil and Dream – and he supposes George too.

George has been here for three days now, and he seems to have picked up on the routine and atmosphere of the house seamlessly. Techno is impressed at his ability to fall into a well-established way of living with so few hiccoughs. As far as Techno can tell, the only misstep he's made is that conversation with Dream yesterday, which had ended with Dream retreating to the porch in silence and staring at the sky for hours and hours. Techno hadn't worked out exactly what had been said, but he knew Dream was being obliging, returning to his trained, obedient state, with no regard for his own autonomy. He'd had to have a word with George about that afterwards.

But overall, it seems to be going well. George is entranced by Dream, anyone can see that, and Dream seems to be finding his presence calming and productive. They spend a lot of time sitting together on the roof by Dream's window, and Techno waves to them when he returns from hunting or gathering firewood. Techno's not sure what the exact labelling of their relationship is – back

before Dream's imprisonment, they'd always remained a bit ambiguous to the world at large, but Dream had certainly let slip some questionable comments over the time they'd been training partners.

(‘Any plans for tonight?’ Techno asked, unwrapping his hands from their axe sparring session. ‘I was thinking of setting off some expired fireworks in the birch forest with Niki and Ranboo, if you’re interested?’

Dream shook his head. ‘Can’t, sorry. It’s a Thursday, I’m going to George’s.’ He said casually, sliding his netherite axe into his belt.

Techno frowned. ‘Have you always gone to George’s on Thursdays? I never noticed.’

Dream looked a little embarrassed. ‘Yeah, it’s our...our night. I don’t get to see him as much as I want to anymore, but Thursdays are...yeah.’ He rubbed the back of his neck. ‘Have fun with Niki and Ranboo though!’ And with that, he scurried off.

Techno was sure he saw a blush spreading across Dream’s face.)

But regardless of whatever’s going on *there*, Techno finds George likable, funny, and friendly. And for now, that will do.

George finds Techno fucking terrifying. Listen, alright, George has never really spent that much time with Techno. He’s always been Dream’s slightly nebulous and intimidating training partner, someone who George knows almost exclusively from violence-adjacent scenarios. And no, when he shows up at midday in pyjamas, wrapped in his cloak and blinking sleep out of his eyes, he’s not *that* intimidating, but he just gives George the feeling that he could kill anybody at any time, and there’s absolutely nothing anyone could do about it.

He also knows that Dream is very, very fond of Techno, and incredibly grateful to him.

So George is trying, really, really, hard not to piss him off. Which is why his heart skips several beats in horror when Techno almost drags him into the corridor by his arm, his face dark. George had just been talking to Dream about his time in prison, and Dream seemed okay? A bit scared, maybe, but he wasn’t withdrawing, or asking George to stop?

Techno closes the door to the kitchen, where Dream is sitting at the table with his head lowered. He takes a deep breath, in and out, clearly trying to control his temper. George is about to pass out.

‘Ok-ok, George, I know you’re not- I get that you don’t know...exactly what the prison was like for Dream.’ Techno says quietly and seriously. ‘And I’m not going to tell you anything of the little that I know about it, because it’s not my business to.’

George nods.

‘But you can’t ask him stuff like that outright.’ Techno is speaking slowly now, and George understands now, that he’s not angry, he’s worried. His tone is laced with concern, not fury, and wow, George has seriously misinterpreted Dream’s body language. He thought Dream was maybe mildly uncomfortable, but by the way Techno is acting he can tell he’s screwed up.

‘He’s-he’ll tell you things, and do things that he doesn’t want to because he’s scared. Whatever-whatever did...all this to him had a lot of rules. Like he wasn’t allowed to talk. And Dream sometimes follows them now, even though he’s safe. You-maybe just watch your tone a bit.’ Techno finishes.

George nods again.

'I'm sorry, I didn't know.' He responds, eyes widened and guilt flushing through his veins. Had Dream felt threatened? Had George reminded him of Quackity, with his questions?

Techno nods. 'I know. But now you do, so...' He nods again. 'Right. I'll leave you to it.' And with that he sweeps out of the hallway, cloak dusting the floor. George watches as he goes to Dream, who doesn't respond, except for a tiny flinch when Techno momentarily touches his shoulder. He murmurs something to Dream, and then heads out the back door to help Phil with the farm.

George feels sick with guilt. Now he's not being an incredible idiot, he can see Dream's tense shoulders, fingers coiled in his hair harshly and his rapidly rising and falling chest. Of course he's not okay.

George very quietly re-enters the room, although he clears his throat as he does so that Dream's not surprised by his presence. He doesn't respond, head still bowed and shoulders hunched up to his ears.

'Dream?' George tries, even though he's sure he won't respond. He doesn't.

He takes a few steps closer to Dream, and sits down in the chair next to him, From this new angle, he can see tears streaming down his face, his eyes scrunched up.

'Dream,' George breathes again, 'Hey. I'm sorry. I didn't realise you were upset.'

Dream doesn't respond again. George wants to fall into a hole in the ground and never resurface. How could he have been so stupid?

He almost reaches out to touch him, but reels himself in.

'Do..you want to go to bed, maybe?' He tries, trying to pry any sort of acknowledgement of the outside world from him.

It works – Dream turns his head, and looks questioningly at George, eyes red-rimmed and scared. He raises his eyebrows slightly in question, and George doesn't understand.

'What-what can I do?' He asks, trying to keep his voice level.

Dream still doesn't speak, and he's looking more and more terrified, his eyes darting around George's face rapidly. He keeps glancing between George and the door to the stairs up to his room. *Oh.*

'No, no I don't- I don't mind what you do. I want you to do what you want, Dream, I'm not in charge of you, I'm not-I'm not giving you orders or anything.' George stutters out. He's never seen Dream like this and it's horrifying. What has Quackity done to injure him so deeply, to cut through to the very core of his best friend's being, and obliterate what was there?

Dream nods, but he looks suspicious of George's words. Then George suddenly realises what's going on, and for the umpteenth time in the last five minutes, he feels like an idiot.

'You can speak, if you want to?' He tries, gently. The words feel heavy.

Dream nods.

'Thank you. I'm sorry.' They are the first words out of Dream's mouth and George feels tears burst

from the corners of his eyes, where they'd been brimming for a while. *Why is he sorry? Why is he thanking me? What kind of fucking sadistic, insane torture had he been through where permission to speak necessitates a thank you?*

A half-baked sob wrenches from his throat, and Dream looks shocked, so George tries to compose himself.

'Do you-do you want to go to bed?' He says, slightly wetly. 'It's okay if you don't.'

Dream very slowly shakes his head. 'Can I go on the porch?' He asks tentatively and very quietly, still wide eyed and clearly confused by George's crying.

'Yes, of course you can, you can go anywhere you want, Dream.' George forces out, desperately willing himself to stop crying.

Dream nods. As he gets up to leave, George can't stop himself.

'I love you, Dream.'

Dream turns to stare at him, mouth slightly open in shock.

'You don't have to say it back.'

They stay there a long time, as George wipes his eyes repeatedly and eventually stemming the flow of tears down his cheeks. Dream is looking at him with soft eyes, and he nods twice at George. George meets his gaze.

'I just thought you should know.' He adds, lamely.

Dream, very slowly, eyes flicking between George's face and the table, moves forward, inch by inch, and softly rests his hand over George's. The weight of it seeps into George's bones, and all of the air in his lungs leaves with a sense of urgency. This means more than everything else, anything on this planet. This, right here, right now, is it.

He knows what it means.

Dream doesn't have to say it.

It only lasts for a second, and then Dream is gone, taking his usual place on the porch steps, head tilted to the sky. George can tell he wants to be alone. He goes to the living room, and sits in the armchair, trying to work out exactly what he's feeling. He identifies sadness, grief, blind rage, and guilt pretty quickly.

It's always been Dream. He knows this.

From the first day they met, the first time they talked, George knew Dream belonged in his life, and he belonged in Dream's. It was that simple.

It's always been Dream.

And yet, when he needed George's help, where was he? Sleeping in his bed soundly, as Dream lived through day after day after day of vicious torture at the hands of a madman. As he was torn apart and left to sew himself back together with the dwindling resources his mind had left.

Forced into submission and obedience simply to survive.

And yes, George had been integral in orchestrating his release, but the damage has clearly been done anyway.

He continues to spiral into his own regrets further and further, until a hand suddenly claps on his shoulder and startles him.

‘Can you help me light the lanterns?’ Phil asks, holding out a box of matches. George glances to the window – it’s night already. How long has he been here?

‘Sure, yeah.’ He smiles quickly, dragging himself out of his thoughts, and takes the matches, moving to light the ones on the mantelpiece. While he’s coaxing the flame to life, he hears someone start shuffling cards behind him. He assumes it’s Phil, but when he blows out the match and turns around, he’s surprised to see that Dream has crept into the room, sitting at the table with Phil and starting to deal out four hands of cards.

‘Playing, George? Tech’s just coming, he’s finishing washing up.’ Phil’s voice is casual and light. George realises he’s missed dinner, but honestly, he’s still reeling from earlier and the idea of food makes him feel ill.

‘Yeah, I’ll play.’ He says quietly, and glances at Dream, who gives him a tiny smile in return.

They play cards long into the night, running through several different games and even making one up. There’s laughter, and fake anger and smug mockery. And at the end, before he goes to bed, Dream squeezes George’s hand, just for a second.

They’re okay.

They’re okay.

Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

Phil cleans his wings and Dream and Techno fight in the garden.

Chapter Notes

This one's a little longer than normal, and I really enjoyed writing it! I promise certain plot points (Q) will be coming up very soon, so don't worry, I haven't forgotten!! As always, comments and kudos are really appreciated and fuel my ADHD motivation by holding me accountable to actually write lmao. Also, you may notice that I added an end point for this fic, chapter 25, as I now have the entire plot mapped out as I want it to be!

Enjoy :)

Warnings: mental illness, discussions of torture

George being here is a good thing, Dream concludes after a week. After the initial shock of his appearance, and the revelation of his role in Dream's escape, Dream has found George to fit into his routines and daily life almost perfectly. Dream can tell he's trying, really hard, not to mess this up.

The only incident that George *had* messed up, leaving Dream in a state of flashback and terror, he'd clearly regretted infinitely, because he hadn't brought up anything to do with the prison since.

As for what he'd said as Dream had turned to leave?

Dream still wasn't sure what to make of that. He and George had always had a friendship that bordered something else. It was never purely platonic, like with Sapnap and Bad, but had also never entirely crossed the line into romantic or anything of that nature either.

George was simply special to Dream, and vice versa. And that was comforting in and of itself.

So yes, overall, George's arrival was a net positive.

He's helped Dream gain a lot of confidence, very quickly. Weirdly, by the stress of his anonymous arrival, he's managed to help Dream feel much more confident about his own combat skills. He'd felt safer, and stronger holding that knife. He had felt proficient and dangerous.

Techno had had faith in him too, and that was encouraging for obvious reasons. He'd even alluded to missing Dream as a sparring partner.

And sure, maybe there's a tiny element of wanting to show George, to prove that he's not a ghost of his former self. That he's capable of being the person he was before all of this happened. He often thinks of *that* Dream, the Dream who George had met all those years ago.

It hurts, and it's necessary.

It drives him forward. And that's why Dream is nervous this morning.

That's not a rare occurrence nowadays, but as he sits at the table, the smell of tea emanating from the mug in his hands, he is especially apprehensive. Phil sits opposite him, mirroring his position with his own cup of coffee.

'I genuinely think we're going to just have carrots for lunch.' Phil sighs. 'We dig up about thirty a day and Techno can't pickle them all. Maybe we should just get some rabbits.'

Dream does laugh at that. The idea of Techno caring for rabbits is a very funny image.

'Do you want to come out hunting today?' Phil asks, sipping his coffee. 'Or I think Techno's planning to expand the mine a bit, so he can start working on the extension.'

Dream shakes his head.

'Hopefully, I'll be busy today.' He replies. 'But if not, I'll come along hunting.'

Phil raises his eyebrows.

'What's the plan?'

Ah. He's back to nervous again. It's a big step, and he's worried both Phil and Techno will veto his proposal immediately. Fuck it, he may as well tell him now.

'I want Techno to start training with me again.' Dream mumbles.

Phil's eyebrows disappear into his hairline.

'Really?' He sounds incredibly surprised, and Dream winces. He knew this was a bad idea.

'If that's...if you think it's okay? I mean, maybe not-'

Phil interrupts him. 'No, no it's a great idea! I think that'll be good for you mate, and Techno will be over the moon.'

Oh.

He's really, really not used to this.

One of the things Dream has struggled with since being freed has been taking his autonomy back. He's used to squashing down opinions or ideas, because why would you let yourself dream of agency in a place like Pandora's Vault?

It takes a lot for him to bring up an idea like this. And yet, every time he does, he's met with nods and smiles, and promises of making it happen.

He isn't sure if it's getting easier.

Dream sips his tea, and pushes it to the back of his mind.

George is sleeping in, Techno is never awake this early, so it's just him and Phil, quietly going about their morning routine.

Phil has become a comfort to Dream. He's surprised at how much he trusts Phil – but then again, should he be? Phil was the person who plucked him out of hell, and carried him back to this little sanctuary. Phil has fed him, clothed him, never laid a hand on him. He's quiet, and moves slowly and predictably around the house, almost as though he knows exactly what will upset Dream.

He can tell that Phil takes notes about what he eats, when he sleeps, what bothers him. He often catches Phil stopping Techno from making loud noises when Dream is particularly on edge.

Phil cares about Dream, even though there's no reason for him to.

And Dream doesn't get it, but he does appreciate it more than he could ever express to Phil.

They continue to chat throughout breakfast, and then Dream refills the bird feeders while Phil washes up.

He loves refilling the feeders – winter is approaching with increasing velocity and the birds need to stock up to survive the cold. He likes knowing that the regular visitors – a few robins, wrens, and an extraordinary number of crows, will be comfortable and warm throughout the freezing, dark months. They don't experience polar nights here – that is, 24/7 darkness – but at midwinter there's only a few hours of true daylight, although several more hours of weird semidarkness.

He takes a moment to watch the flurry of activity that consumes the bird feeders after he goes back inside. It makes him smile.

Phil is in the living room, wings spread out and feathers everywhere. He's preening, Dream recognises. He does it rarely, because it's such a hassle and he rarely uses his wings at the moment anyway, but Phil often complains of his misaligned feathers.

Dream hums a hello, and sits in the armchair, legs tucked up underneath him, and watches as Phil straightens some feathers, and gently removes others. Dream's so entranced by the repetitive and satisfying motions that when Phil's voice sounds in his ears he almost jumps.

'Can you do me a favour?'

Dream nods, standing up.

'I can't quite get the ones just here,' Phil points to the feathers that originate near his shoulder blades. 'Could you get them for me?'

'I don't-are you sure?' Dream asks hesitantly. He's touched Phil's wings before, running his hands over the sleek feathers, but never tried to actually preen them.

Phil nods. 'Don't worry, if you hurt me, I'll squawk.' Dream huffs out a laugh as he takes a seat behind him. From this angle, he can see the misaligned feathers clearly, sticking out against the line of the muscles. He very gently aligns one, manipulating it deftly back into place, and Phil sighs in relief.

'I've been trying to get that one for days.' He says through a smile, and relaxes even further under Dream's hands.

Emboldened, Dream works his way around the skewed feathers, some coming off in his hand to reveal pin feathers growing below, and some falling neatly into place alongside the others. It's much more satisfying to do than watch, and Dream finds himself enjoying it immensely.

Techno walks in near the end of the process, bowl of carrot soup in hand, and rolls his eyes.

‘Oh, so you trust him but not me?’ He asks, joking annoyance in his tone.

‘Yes. He’s actually good at it.’ Phil responds bluntly, and Dream laughs.

‘Very rude, Phil.’ Techno remarks, taking a seat at the table. ‘And I had to make my own lunch.’

‘Yes, I’m not your staff, Tech.’ Phil replies snarkily.

‘Good god, what did I do to deserve this treatment?’ Techno asks sarcastically, and takes a sip of his soup.

‘All done, I think.’ Dream says quietly, standing up from behind Phil and wiping his hands on his trousers. Phil flexes his flight feather muscles, and nods. ‘Feels about a thousand times better, thank you Dream.’ He stands up too.

‘Right. I’m off hunting, we’re out of meat again. Any preference?’

Dream shakes his head as Techno requests rabbit for stew. Phil nods in agreement, and heads out, leaving them alone together.

His nerves return.

‘So Dream, any plans for today?’ Techno asks.

Dream nods, opening and then closing his mouth. Asking things of Techno and Phil makes his throat close up, and he swallows in an attempt to relax a little. It works, and he tries again.

‘I-I was hoping, if you’re not busy, I was just- maybe we- can we spar? If you’re not too busy.’

Techno looks surprised, just like Phil, but he’s already got a smile on his face, and a glint in his eyes.

‘Oh, absolutely. Nothing I’d like more.’ Techno beams, and Dream can tell he’s been hoping Dream will bring it up. ‘This afternoon?’

Dream nods, unable to keep the smile off his face. He’s excited. ‘If that’s okay with you?’

‘Excellent. I’ve missed sparring with you, Phil’s good but he’s too slow. In my back garden?’ Techno finishes up his soup. ‘Let me go and wash this up and I’ll bring down my training gear.’

As Techno cleans up after himself, Dream makes his way over to Techno’s garden. While there’s still a definite chill in the air, most of the first snow has melted and the sun is shining today.

Dream’s been in Techno’s garden before, but now he knows it’s an informal training ground, the design makes a lot more sense. Mossy, bouncy ground and a wide open space, but with tree and rock cover to allow for more tactical fighting. Dream’s brain is already concocting scenarios and clever little tricks he could pull. All those years of manhunt have honed his agility down to a fine art, and he’s thankful that his strength, rather than flexibility, has taken the brunt of the damage from Quackity. With the exception of his achilles tendon, of course. He’s just examining the space behind a boulder, lost in thought, when he hears a tapping above him.

Startled, he looks up rapidly, turning to try and pinpoint the source. There it is again – a tap tap tap. He follows the sound up to the top floor of Techno’s cabin. George is waving to him through the glass, a grin on his face, visible even through the dusty window.

An excited warmth fill Dream’s chest, and he waves back. George disappears from the window,

but reappears ten seconds later at the back door, a blanket wrapped around his shoulders against the cold.

‘Hey, good morning. Or afternoon.’ George corrects himself. ‘What’s going on?’

‘Me and Techno are sparring.’ Dream says, a hint of pride in his voice. It’s a big step for him, to deliberately open himself up to potential pain, and he’s glad George is here to watch him. He hopes it isn’t going to be a disaster.

Obviously, Dream has in the back of his mind that this might make him panic. But he can’t hide all his life, and he may as well find out how he responds in the company of three people who he knows care for him.

Huh.

He knows that they care for him. Dream didn’t even hesitate to believe it.

That’s nice.

George is smiling back, eyes wide. ‘Am I allowed to watch?’ He asks, a little cheekily.

Secretly, Dream was hoping he’d ask that. Even though it makes him shy, he wants George to see that he’s not just a helpless victim. Dream nods. As he does, Techno reappears, a duffel bag over his shoulder.

‘Ready?’ He asks, throwing the bag to the ground. ‘We can start really slow and gently. We should probably warm up, actually.’

A year ago, Dream would have scoffed, but today he’s grateful that Techno has suggested it. They stretch together, moving through the motions painfully slowly. It makes Dream painfully appreciate just how much worse he is, compared to his prime. He struggles to maintain standing stretches for too long, and the cardio warmup is cut very short when Dream points out that he’s going to be too tired to actually do any sparring. Soon though, the boring necessities are done, and Dream and Techno are facing each other, wooden swords in hand.

Techno raises his eyebrows, Dream nods, and half a second later Techno’s sword comes swinging down, exactly where Dream’s head had been a moment prior. There’s no weight behind it, of course, and it wouldn’t hurt if Dream had been caught by it, but that’s not the point.

Dream ducks and weaves, deftly moving his feet over the grass and dancing just out of reach of Techno’s weapon. It’s like a natural instinct, and Dream feels alive. His bones are already aching, his muscles starting to feel tender, but they continue the pas de deux anyway.

Dream still hasn’t swung, his sword almost flying out of his grip as he continues to adeptly dodge all of Techno’s aggress. From the high ground of the boulder, he even risks leaping over the blade, turning in mid-air and landing behind Techno, who turns just in time to glance his first strike away.

Any other warrior would have been run through, but Techno knows Dream’s style.

The two of them continue the whirlwind dance, and George sits, comfortably out of range, entranced. He’s watching both of them, but mainly Dream. He’s seen Dream fight before, of course he has, but not for a while and certainly not during recovery from such massive injuries. He wonders if Dream has noticed that he’s adapted all of his stances, the way he holds his weapon, the accommodate his injuries.

He's standing with his weight off of his bad ankle, landing on the other where possible, and he's maintaining his grip very lightly when he isn't swinging, so as not to tire out his hand, George assumes.

He can't keep his eyes off Dream, who flips through the air nimbly and never seems to be caught off guard.

After a few minutes, Phil joins him, sitting on the step with a quiet greeting, which George returns. The pair in front of them continue to spar.

'He's not going easy on him.' Phil remarks, as Techno's sword narrowly misses Dream's knee.

'I think Dream would be upset if he did.' George replies. Dream would feel condescended and coddled, he knows this, and Techno probably does too.

There's a moment of silence, broken only by George gasping as Dream is nearly hit. He's starting to slow down now.

Phil watches on with excitement, rather than concern. He's predicting Techno's moves under his breath, George realises.

He's curious now. 'Did Techno train with you?'

Phil drags his eyes away from the sparring to meet George's. 'Oh yeah, for years. He taught Wil and Tommy too, but they weren't very naturally gifted. Wil especially. I think Tommy just got bored.'

George hums. Sounds like Tommy.

'I always wondered if part of why Wil...did what he did was out of bitterness. He couldn't defend himself the way everyone else could, so he changed the rules.'

George tilts his head. 'He did have a real thing against armour.' He reminisces out loud. Phil nods.

'I remember that too. I miss Wil, of course I do, but sometimes I wonder if it's a good thing he can't do any more damage to the server. I mean, just look at what happened to Dream.' Phil gestures to him. Both of them have stopped now, Dream's out of breath and looks a little weak.

George frowns. 'You think Wil is responsible for what Dream did?'

Phil shrugs. 'Not entirely, but probably a lot of it, yes. From what I've heard, he was the catalyst for everything that happened, and most of what Dream was doing was reactionary. That doesn't mean he's blameless,' Phil clarifies, 'But I think both Dream and Wil had the same insecurities, and it brought them out in each other.'

George turns the new perspective over in his mind.

Interesting.

'Dream was ill.' George states simply. 'He was very ill. He was paranoid, all the time, and scared, more than anything.'

Phil doesn't reply, so George continues.

'He wouldn't sleep for days, and when he did, he'd have nightmares. About the server being destroyed, about his friends dying. The others, people like Fundy, will say they tried to help him,

but he wasn't even listening to *me*, let alone people he didn't trust.'

George swallows.

'So they stuck him in a prison cell to be tortured, and washed their hands of him. He needed time away from everything, he needed-he felt like the entire weight of the SMP was on his shoulders alone. Is it any wonder he did bad things?' George spits out. Phil turns to look at him.

'Once Dream decides that he likes you, he'll protect you to the ends of the earth, he's always been like that. It's the best thing about him. He was trying to protect us.'

There's a pause.

'Are you okay, George?' Phil asks, quietly. He doesn't reply.

Dream and Techno stagger over, and collapse onto the floor in front of them. Techno lays out on his back, whereas Dream sits up, leaning against a rock.

'That was great. I feel like my brain's about to overheat from trying to get a hit on him.' Techno points at Dream, who smiles widely.

'Was fun.' Dream says, glee clear in his tone.

They all make their way back into the house, Techno and Dream describing their fight with Phil nodding along. George is a little lost in thought, but tries to participate nonetheless.

Upstairs, in his bedside table drawer, his forgotten communicator beeps.

'Where are you? I've been to your house, and you've not been home in at least a week. Are you okay? Please let me know. – S'

Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

A new arrival.

Chapter Notes

Hey! I really struggled with writing this one, but I hope the characterisation works. Things are going to start happening much faster now, so chapters may be slightly less frequent to make sure I get everything right! As always, comments and kudos are appreciated, enjoy!
warnings - threats of violence, mentions of torture, suicidal thoughts.

Just as Techno suspected, things in the arctic cabins change faster than any of them had hoped. Almost as soon as they've finished their sparring match, the group move inside Phil's cabin. Phil and George go to the kitchen, presumably to deal with the spoils of Phil's hunting trip, whereas Techno and Dream collapse onto the sofa, Dream leaning into his chest. They're both sweaty, but thanks to the cold air they're also both getting chilly. In a minute they'll probably start fighting over who gets the shower, but first, it's nice to just have a minute to relax. Dream rests his head on Techno's sternum, and Techno's arm curls reflexively around his waist.

It's been two months, about, Techno realises. Dream's come so far. From the shivering, injured wreck of a person that Phil had carried onto the prison roof, to the man comfortably resting on him, completely relaxed after a hard training session.

Techno is very grateful that he got to be a part of it. He raises one hand to the back of Dream's head, and gently laces his fingers through his hair. Dream lets out a little sigh.

Techno is so completely lost in thoughts of recovery and a hopeful future, he doesn't notice the front door open, or the unfamiliar voice that rings out. Only Phil's voice, frantic and loud, echoing into the room, brings him into the present with a start.

Dream has tensed up completely, shrinking into Techno with heavy breaths. Techno sits up as much as he can, hand going straight to his axe, left on the floor – and then he hears the voice clearly.

He's finally come to visit his Dad.

Tommy opens the door casually, talking back over his shoulder.

'I don't know what you're so stressed about Phil, it's barely even a mess in here, oh, hey Techno what's...what's...' Tommy's voice trails off.

Techno closes his eyes.

‘What the fuck?’ Tommy’s tone has changed, it’s become angry and audibly scared.

Phil’s in here now too, and God knows where George is, but Techno is quite glad he’s not joined them.

‘What the fuck? Dad?’ Tommy turns to Phil, who’s moving between Tommy and the sofa with his hands up placatingly.

‘Listen, Tommy, you don’t have to—don’t yell—’ Phil starts, but he’s interrupted by Tommy again.

‘What the fuck is he doing here?’ Tommy spits, voice rising. ‘Techno?’ His gaze turns to him, and Techno looks away. He gently sits up, Dream moving off his chest and into the corner of the sofa. Techno sees him draw his legs up to his chest in the corner of his vision.

Tommy’s gaze is swinging between Techno and Phil, sparing occasional glances at Dream, searching for any semblance of an explanation. Neither him nor Phil are giving him one.

‘No-no he’s meant to be—*you’re meant to be in prison.*’ Tommy hisses, pushing past Phil and moving towards Dream, drawing his netherite sword with a harsh scraping sound. Techno hears Dream give off a tiny, scared noise, his head down and hands brought up defensively. With a weight in his stomach, and the knowledge that this will probably end poorly, Techno stands up and squares his shoulders.

‘Tommy,’ He intones, voice low. ‘No.’

Tommy’s steps stutter. Techno is towering over him, and still in his training gear, making him even broader than normal. He can see that Tommy’s considering it, considering actually fighting Techno, but a moment later he seems to think better of it, and drops his sword back in its scabbard.

‘Explain.’ He says, voice shaking.

‘Sit down, Tommy.’ Phil says, voice a little desperate. Tommy does, at the table, as far from Dream as possible. Phil sits opposite him, and Techno resumes his place on the sofa, next to Dream, who is still refusing to look up, and trembling all over.

Phil opens his mouth, ready to speak. And then George, clueless and wiping rabbit blood off his hands, walks into the living room from the back porch. And suddenly it all goes to shit.

‘What that fuck is going on?!’ Tommy is shouting and gesticulating, ‘What have you been running, a care home for fucking war criminals?’ Techno starts yelling back, because he can’t help it, Phil is putting himself in between the pair of them and George is asking *what the fuck Tommy is doing here*, and Dream is shaking, eyes darting wildly from person to person, anxiety skyrocketing and his heart in his throat. He goes to stand, to try and stop them from fighting over him, he tries to placate Tommy, speaking pleadingly.

‘Tommy, I’m sorry, please—’

He’s interrupted. ‘No! You—don’t say my name, shut up, shut the fuck up!’ Tommy’s eyes are gleaming with fury, and Techno has to hold him back. He’s vitriolic and violent, and Dream knows an order when he hears it.

They start arguing again, and Dream sits down again, muscles quivering, bows his head and shuts up.

Tommy’s going to take him back to the prison. And Techno, Phil and George will be punished by

the rest of the SMP for their kindness towards him.

He'd rather fucking die, he'd rather be ground to dust and scattered to the wind and forgotten forever.

He sinks further into the sofa, his head covered with his arms and waits for it to end.

Techno is the one who notices. When he does, he literally picks Tommy up by the back of his collar, and despite his struggling and shouting, Tommy is taken into the kitchen and told to calm down, and stay there.

Dream is glad that the noise has stopped, but when he feels the sofa dip next to him, he somehow finds it within him to tense even more. Whoever it is might hit him, might burn him, might slit his throat and leave him to bleed out, choking in his own blood. Dream isn't really sure where he is, anymore.

It takes a long time, hours probably, for him to come to his senses. And even then, he still feels as vulnerable as he had been in the cell. He knows *someone* is still sitting next to him, and that scares him too.

Somehow, eventually, he makes it up to his room, and he closes the door behind him. He even locks it. Dream crawls under the covers, and closes his eyes.

Phil is furious. He is absolutely, positively, filled with anger at Tommy, more so than he thinks he's ever been before. He's staring at him across the kitchen table as Techno deposits a hazy and dissociated Dream into his room. They haven't spoken in fifteen minutes, and Tommy is glaring right back at him.

George has, probably for the best, decided to retire to Techno's cottage for the rest of the evening.

Tommy is tapping the table with his knuckles. Normally it wouldn't bother him, but Phil is so riled up at his son that it's pissing him off to absolutely no end.

Techno's footsteps draw closer, and he appears at the bottom of the stairs. His hair is a total mess, and he's still in his training gear. He stamps closer and draws a chair, facing Tommy next to Phil. Tommy bristles at that. It's obvious now, who's on who's side.

Phil takes one deep breath in, and one deep breath out.

'Right.' He says evenly. 'No yelling.'

Techno nods. Tommy raises an eyebrow, but eventually concedes, and gives one, brusque nod.

Phil clears his throat. 'First of all, hello Tommy. It's good to see you.'

Tommy rolls his eyes. 'Okay, enough. What's he doing here?'

Phil blinks slowly. 'Dream has been staying with us for a few months now.' He says carefully. 'He's recovering.'

Tommy scoffs. 'Recovering from what? A couple of months of alone time? Did he get too self-reflective and realise that he's a fucking awful person? Did he actually have to deal with the consequences of his actions? Boo hoo.'

Phil and Techno make eye contact. They're both making the same expression of intense confusion. Does Tommy not know about the torture? Or has he grown so callous to violence during his time in the SMP that it means nothing to him now? Phil prays it's the former.

'Tommy – Tommy what do you know about the prison?' Phil queries hesitantly.

Tommy looks incredulous. 'What do you mean? He basically had an all expenses paid break away from people who wanted him dead.'

Phil feels simultaneously incredibly relieved and a little sick.

'That's not-that's not accurate, Tommy. At all.' Techno says through gritted teeth. 'Dream was-it wasn't a holiday.'

Tommy shrugs.

'Whatever. He got what he deserved.'

Techno stands up so quickly his chair clatters over behind him, and Tommy flinches, wide-eyed. Techno leans forward, face directly in Tommy's, who moves back, uncomfortable.

'You don't know what you're talking about, Tommy. Stop acting like a toddler.'

Tommy's eyes narrow, and he goes to argue but Techno continues.

'If you're going to come here and make big statements like that without knowing the facts, you should be prepared to deal with the consequences. You think you know everything? You don't even know how much you don't know. Now either shut up and try to learn something, or get out.' Techno spits out the last word with vitriol.

Tommy's speechless. Phil can't remember if Tommy's *ever* been speechless before, but if he has, it was a long time ago. His mouth is opening and closing like a goldfish, and eventually he turns to Phil, eyes wide and looking for support.

'I...Dad?' He says, voice full of disbelief.

'Techno's right.' Phil's voice is steely, more so than he intended. He doesn't want to say any more than that. The betrayal in Tommy's eyes is painful enough.

'Right.' Tommy chokes out after a minute. 'Fine. What am I so ignorant about? Because from my perspective, Dad, I've just walked into my living room to find someone who abused me for months *hanging out on the sofa*, when I thought he'd been safely locked away from me.'

Phil closes his eyes. Ouch. He once again ponders if he should even be given the title 'Dad'.

'Tommy, I'm sorry it shocked you. I can see why it would upset you, but you haven't been to visit in a year. I didn't think you'd ever be in the same room.' Phil says steadily, still with his eyes closed. 'And believe me, he won't hurt you.' He manages to finish the important part, and opens his eyes.

Tommy is still staring at him.

'Right. Okay. And I'm just expected to believe you?' His voice is trembling and Phil realises that he's not angry at Tommy anymore, somehow, he's just tired.

'You know what he did to me when he made Tubbo exile me. Am I not important?'

This is draining him. Tommy's accusatory gaze has softened to a pleading one. Phil finds it so easy to forget that Tommy's *young*. He's young, and all the bluster and arrogance is, mostly, a façade. Phil knows this because he raised Tommy, he saw the Tommy who would furtively ask for hugs and then reject them a moment after. He's seen Tommy vulnerable, and this is it.

'He made me want to kill myself.' Tommy whispers, and *oh God, no*.

His son wanted to die, that's not really a new one, is it? Phil considers that Tommy might have gone the same way as Wil, and it tears his heart apart the moment he does. He just wants to fix this. Neither him nor Techno have said anything.

Tommy's words have flooded every corner of the room, ringing in Phil's ears.

'I'm sorry, Toms.' He croaks out eventually. 'I'm so sorry that happened to you.'

Tommy nods, once.

'He did that you me, and you're my fucking Dad. So what-what could possibly make you take his side over mine?'

Phil wants to cry. This is so fucking hard. Techno must sense his desperation because he takes over.

'He's not more important, we haven't chosen sides Tommy. There are no sides in this. It's deeper than that. Listen, he's done terrible things, and nobody is defending them, least of all Dream.'

Techno takes a deep breath.

'He's not-Tommy, he's not the same person who was thrown into prison. You saw him, he was scared of you, does that seem like the Dream you knew?'

That seems to get through to Tommy. After a couple of seconds, he opens, closes and then opens his mouth again.

'It-it's very convincing if it's an act.' He mutters.

Phil rolls his eyes even through the state he's in. This is classic Tommy – only willing to believe anything when he's seen first-hand proof himself. It's not enough that his Dad and famously paranoid tutor believe Dream, oh no.

'I've seen the inside of the prison, Tommy, it's not an act. He was-he was-' Phil stalls, unsure of what to say.

'It was gruesome. He wasn't being treated very well at all, and I'll let you catch the implications of that yourself.' Phil turns away. He knows he's gone pale.

Tommy is still eyeing him suspiciously, but the defensive anger in his face has gone.

'Is it-is it serious then?' Tommy's voice has a tinge of curiosity, more than anything, which sort of annoys Phil in a different way.

'Yes.' He replies plainly. 'And it would be appreciated if you could keep the yelling to a minimum.'

Tommy raises an eyebrow, but nods.

'I'm fucking knackered. He's not sleeping in my room, is he?' He asks. Phil is incredibly glad that he didn't put Dream in there, because he suspects that would be the end of Tommy calling him his Dad.

'He's in the spare room, in the attic. I didn't-I didn't think you'd want him in your room.'

'Good. ' Tommy stands up. 'I'm going to take my stuff up then. But I'm not happy about this.' And he heads up, somehow making picking up a rucksack and opening a door resentful.

Phil sinks into his chair, as does Techno next to him. How can he possibly fuck up more? He rests his head on his friend's shoulder, and sighs, over and over.

He knows Techno is pretending not to notice his crying, and he's very grateful.

Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

Restless nights and a hug with wings.

Chapter Notes

Hello! This one's got some lovely Dream angst, with hurt/comfort ofc. Hope you have a great day, and enjoy the chapter :) as always, comments and kudos are wildly appreciated, and genuinely do motivate me to upload, so pls feel free! warning: torture, suicide, vomiting, food insecurity and elements of disordered eating.

Dream doesn't come out of his room anymore. He doesn't eat, only taking the glasses of water offered with every meal that Phil or Techno leave by his door. He's absolutely silent, all the time. George spends a few minutes outside his door, listening to any sign of movement, but it's entirely quiet, not even the creaking of floorboards or the swishing of sheets. He swears he can sense that Dream is holding his breath.

The only exception to this is his nightmares. They're stomach churning, violent and sickening, Dream's guttural screams permeating the cold air. He pleads and begs for mercy, sobbing for hours, and the only person Dream will respond even vaguely positively is Techno, who he sometimes allows to sit with him at his bedside, but not touch. Phil says grimly that it feels as though all of the progress he's made over the two months has been lost, and Dream has regressed to the first few days of his freedom.

It goes on for days, a week, two weeks? George isn't sure, but Tommy is hanging around for all of it. They avoid each other, mostly, and Tommy is probably only here to find an opportunity to kill Dream anyway. Techno and Phil seem to share his worries, because one of them remains stationed in the kitchen or living room almost all the time.

Once, just once, he hears Dream begging for death. It's quieter but somehow more urgent, more pleading. More real. The Dream that George met, the Dream before all of this, would never have done that, George is certain.

'Please, please, do it. I can't-I can't-kill me!' Dream's voice is wrecked, throat screamed hoarse and bloody. He sounds desperate. It gives George a fresh revelation into how much pain Dream has gone through, and it makes him vomit, when he hears it. As he leans over the toilet, tears and spit and snot on his face, the sounds of Dream begging for death are burned into his mind.

Once his stomach starts cramping and he has nothing more to throw up, he just lies on the floor of the bathroom, acid stinging his throat and mouth, until Dream's cries quiet, and eventually stop. He wants to go and comfort him, but on the one occasion he'd caught Dream replacing the glass of water outside his door, he'd not recognised George, eyes glazed and flinching back in terror, before retreating behind his bedroom door again.

George is pretty sure that he couldn't handle it if Dream doesn't know who he is anymore.

He wonders if it's self-destructive, to force himself to listen to his best friend's trauma laid bare in such a violent way. Maybe George deserves it, for leaving him in *there* so long.

The next morning, they don't mention it, but George can see from the bags under their eyes that Phil and Techno were kept up by Dream too.

And to his surprise, nobody talks about it until Tommy brings it up.

'So, are we all just pretending we didn't hear that last night, then?' Tommy says bluntly over an already tense dinner. George immediately puts down his cutlery and pushes his plate away. Phil sighs and Techno glares at him.

'What do you want to talk about, Tommy?' Phil says, voice slightly hardened and terse. Tommy shrugs.

'Just feels like maybe we should... I don't know, acknowledge it at least.'

'I'd rather not.' George's words fall out of his mouth before he can stop them. He's been trying to be civil and polite to Tommy, but this? This is Tommy deliberately pushing the wrong buttons. He waits for Tommy to start raising his voice, but to his surprise, it never comes. Instead there's a brief silence, followed by a quiet 'Sorry.' From Tommy.

'I just- I mean, it seems like he's, y'know, he's been through a lot, and I was just thinking maybe we should talk about how to make it a bit better for him. Maybe.'

George turns to face Tommy in utter disbelief. What the hell is this? Phil and Techno are echoing his reaction.

'Where's this come from?' Phil manages, after he's swallowed his shock.

'It's not exactly a nice thing to hear when you're trying to wind down for the night.'

George scoffs, and turns away. There it is. How quintessentially Tommy, to somehow make this about himself.

'It's fucking weird to hear him like this. It's sad. I don't know, he's a dick but I don't-yeah.' Tommy finishes abruptly. 'Forget it.' He murmurs.

There's a moment of silence before Tommy expertly changes the subject. They all move on quickly, because nobody knows where to even *start* with responding to that.

George goes to bed, and his thoughts balloon into worries and eventually panic, only to be punctured by Dream's cries a few hours later, which wipes out all the anxiety and replaces it with heartbreak. He doesn't know what to do.

The next morning, when Phil goes to leave a breakfast by Dream's bedroom door, he's greeted by a scared looking pair of green eyes peering around the door. Phil nearly drops the tray in surprise, but catches himself and gives a kind smile to Dream as he leaves the food by the door.

'Hey Dream. Fancy eating something today?' He asks hopefully.

The eyes disappear, then reappear again as he opens the door more. Dream looks sallow and ill,

and Phil can see he's shaking. He has bruises and scratches all over his arms and face, Phil assumes he gave them to himself during his nightmares. He glances between Phil and the food, reaching out hesitantly. Phil nods encouragingly, and *yes*, Dream takes up the whole plate, and the glass, and brings it into his room.

'Hope you like it, it's the first thing I've made without carrots in a month!' Phil calls as the door gently closes, and he almost dances down the stairs. Phil's thrilled. He's thrilled. It's such a tiny improvement, but Phil's learned to relish the small steps that recovery often comes in.

He spends the next half hour merrily cleaning the kitchen up, waving to Techno as he passes through on his way to the farm.

To say Phil is jealous of Techno's friendship with Dream is a step too far – but Phil does wish he was afforded the same trust. He understands why he isn't, of course, he barely knew Dream before he had found him in that cell. But, when Phil thinks of the soft moments he's had with Dream, preening his wings, eating together in comfortable silence, the few times that Dream has leant on him for comfort. That one occasion in which he hugged Phil for an entire afternoon, curled up together on the couch and quietly talking about anything, distracting Dream from his thoughts.

Phil hopes he'll get more of those moments, and *no*, he tells himself, not just because he wishes he'd had more with Wilbur. He still sees Wil, when he looks at Dream, sometimes. He desperately tries not to, because *Wil was different, Wil was his fault, Wil asked him for help and Phil didn't care enough to go to his aid.*

He hopes he gets more of those moments because he likes Dream. And (disgustingly) he feels sorry for him, but he also (more importantly) feels like he actually can be a part of Dream healing. Dream being better. Dream not hurting anyone, or himself, again.

Phil's spent hours pondering whether or not he's indulging the early stages of a saviour complex by being so involved in Dream's life. He's decided that if he's overstepping, he knows Techno will stop him, so for now, he doesn't care. Dream deserves someone to dote on him anyway.

He finishes up the countertops. He's not sure what to do with the rest of his time - maybe some weeding later – but for now, he has a chapter of his book what he's been saving for a good day, and settles down to read it in the living room armchair.

He doesn't notice when Dream enters the room, plate and glass in hand. He's so engrossed in his reading that he jumps when he notices the shadow of Dream on the floor beside him, hovering out of view awkwardly.

Phil turns, not sure who to expect and unable to keep the shock off his face when he clocks that it's Dream. He's standing with both hands holding the crockery, like he's afraid he'll lose his grip at any moment.

'Hey, Dream.' Phil smiles. 'Can I take those?'

Dream doesn't respond, staring at him with big eyes and chewing his lip.

'Do you want more?' Phil asks, putting this book down and standing up. Dream leans back a little, holding the plate close to his chest, but nods, so minutely that Phil almost misses it.

'Sure, no problem. Come with, you can pick out what you want.' Phil leads him into the kitchen, and starts taking out fruit, vegetables, bread and cheese, anything Phil thinks Dream might want.

'Help yourself,' He smiles. 'I'm just going to check on the bird feeders.'

A little trick he'd learned from raising Wilbur is that people who are nervous around food will hesitate to take anything when observed. He'd started doing the buffet and 'oh-I'll-be-back-in-a-second' routine back when Wilbur was about twelve, and it had really helped him gain some confidence about taking what he wanted. It stopped him hoarding food in his room too, since he could have anything anytime.

It works. When he comes back, the food has been picked at, and Dream is nowhere to be seen, presumably he's retreated to his room. Phil clears the counters of the spread, and washes up the glass Dream has left on the table.

That evening, he risks a trip up to Dream's room again, knocking on the door with plate in hand. Tommy, George and Techno are downstairs, somehow casually chatting over stew, and Phil's pleasantly surprised when Dream opens the door almost instantly. He opens it a crack at first, and then fully once he sees it's Phil.

'Stew, if you want it.' Phil says, with a smile on his face. Dream returns it, and takes the plate. He almost wants to offer a place at the table, but Dream has closed the door before he can consider it. Phil goes back downstairs, and joins in the celebration of their freedom from carrot-based meals.

Despite the lively dinner, the others drift off to bed sooner than usual. Techno is tired from his day of hunting, Tommy needs to write to Tubbo (he's been here a week longer than he intended already), and George is stressed, meaning he's tired almost all the time.

Phil's just snuffing the candles when he hears the creak of the stairs to Dream's room, and he turns, curious as to who's snuck back into the house. As it turns out, nobody has. Dream is making his way shakily down the stairs, supported by the banister and another hand on the wall. Phil watches, eyes wide with surprise as he makes his way into the living room, hands fiddling with his sleeves. He looks up at Phil, who tries to keep his expression friendly and not manic, and Phil can see fear in his eyes.

'Hey, what's up?' Phil asks quietly. Dream looks away, fiddling with his sleeves even more, and then drops his gaze.

Phil's left to interpret that as he wants. And, not sure whether it's right, wrong, or most likely somewhere in between, he opens up his arms for a hug.

Dream accepts. His chin rests on Phil's shoulder and Phil wraps his arms and then his wings around them. Dream is breathing quickly and shallowly, and Phil quietly shushes him.

He's leaning on me, Phil realises, taking a step back to brace himself. He wonders how long Dream has been wanting someone to give him a hug. He seems to be on the verge of collapse. Phil eventually manages to manoeuvre them to the sofa, where Dream falls into him with all of his body weight. They stay there for a long time – Phil even dozes off, and whenever he comes to Dream is snoring lightly on his chest, warm from Phil's wings.

Phil gently combs his hands through Dream's hair. Its been neglected while he's been in his room, but Phil works gently through the easier knots and leaves the hard ones for Techno to deal with at some point. It's soothing for Phil, and Dream seems to like it, judging by his soft sighs.

Phil almost wants to reach out, and trace the curling and raised scar on his jaw, the most striking damage from his torture. He doesn't though, just in case it wakes Dream up. It would be a shame to ruin the moment. He wonders if, one day, in the distant future, Dream will look at that scar and feel nothing. Not to hate himself for it, or to go too far the other way, and romanticise it. Just nothing.

The sun eventually rises, and when it does, Dream wakes and quietly disappears back up to his room. He never said a word, but it doesn't matter.

Maybe he wanted Phil to know that they were still on good terms, that he still trusts him. Maybe he was in desperate need of comfort, and Phil was the first person he came across. Maybe he was just cold at night and wanted to go to sleep comfortably for once.

Phil doesn't know, and he doesn't mind.

Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

Tommy talks to Dream.

Chapter Notes

Hey! This one was great fun to write. I really hope you like it! I saw in comments that some people were confused about the canon that this fic exists in, and to clarify - Everything is the same except the revive book has never been used in this fic. Therefore, no Ghostbur, and Tommy never got stuck in prison with Dream. I think that's all the canon divergence prior to the fic beginning?

As always, comments and kudos fuel my motivation to write, right now I'm getting super busy, and updates may be less frequent!

Warnings: Discussions of torture, slight mentions of disordered eating.

Tommy is sitting at the table, gaze fixed on the stairs up to the spare room – or Dream's room, as it's now known. He's fiddling with the saltshaker, rolling it around in his hands and not sure what exactly to do with himself. Phil and Techno have thawed out a little now, since Tommy's been around for over a week. He's been helping around the house, gathering supplies for Techno's extension, and most of all, he's been thinking.

Thinking about Dream, obviously.

Tommy's got a lot to consider regarding Dream.

Firstly, Tommy knows that Dream's changed. It's obvious. Despite his initial misgivings, he's had to face the fact that it's not an elaborate act. Techno and Phil talk just loud enough that he can pick up clues about his time in prison, and even though he hates what Dream did to him, Tommy can't deny that he feels bad for him now.

It's one of the afternoon lulls in the activity of the houses, Techno and Phil are probably off doing something unnecessary to the farm to increase yield by 2%, and George is reading, or more likely, napping in his room. All is quiet, and nobody is in Phil's house except for Tommy and Dream.

Tommy steels himself as he sets down the saltshaker, and stands up, pushing his chair back, and walks on slightly shaky legs towards the stairs.

One step.

Two steps.

Three steps.

Tommy has to pause to take a breath. He can't believe he's doing this, but he has to. He has to talk

to Dream for himself.

In a selfish way, he's just a tiny bit glad that Dream is injured. It makes Tommy feel less scared.

Four steps.

Five steps.

Six steps.

Seven steps.

He hears a movement from Dream's room, and it makes him pause. He wants to run away.

Eight steps.

Nine steps.

Oh look. He's here. He turns to his right, and he's facing the dark oak door that conceals the small but light room in which Dream now resides. His throat is bone dry.

He knocks lightly, twice.

No response.

Hesitantly, he calls out. 'Dream? It's-it's me. Tommy. Can we talk?'

Still, silence. And then a shuffling sound. A hesitant knock sounds back. Tommy's confused, but he goes with it.

'I'm not going to open the door, I don't want to-that just seems like a bad idea.'

Dream still says nothing, and it's making Tommy nervous. He thinks back to the stony silence Dream had maintained when he blew up his stockpile in Logstedshire.

This is different though. He holds the power now. He grips his netherite sword out of habit.

'This is weird, huh?' Tommy gets out. 'I didn't-I didn't really think I'd ever see you again.'

There's nothing from the other side of the door. *This is stupid*, Tommy thinks. But then, he sees a shadow pass over the gap at the threshold, and then a light thud. He realises Dream is sitting against the door.

So he's listening.

Tommy mirrors him. He takes off his sword and slides down the door until he's sitting with his back against it too. Neither of them speak for a moment, and then Tommy clears his throat.

'Your nightmares-they sounds really bad. I had-I had them after exile. About you, mostly.' He clears his throat again, awkwardly. Dream is silent.

'I should hate you. I should despise you, and I should want you dead.' Tommy manages to get out. 'But I don't. I did, when I first saw you. But-but-I mean you've got Techno and Phil and George to thank, really, but- I don't-' Tommy's stuttering his way through this and it makes himself cringe. He stops, and takes a deep breath.

‘When I think about you, I just feel sad.’

Tommy closes his eyes. He’s done a lot of thinking over the last few days. What he’d heard of Phil and Techno’s whispers and conversations had inferred some of the things that’s happened to Dream. But the main thing was the midnight exchange with George he’d had the night before. They’d bumped into each other on the way to and from Techno’s garden. He doesn’t know what George was doing, but he had been intending to get some night-time archery practice in. They’d almost collided, making Tommy jump out of his skin and get halfway through drawing his sword before he realised who it was.

‘Sorry.’ George had mumbled. ‘Was just on my way to bed.’

Tommy’s heart raced, and he nodded. ‘Right. Are you-do you sleep in Dream’s room? Or do you..’ He trailed off, seeing the sad expression on George’s face.

‘Uh, no. I’m in Techno’s spare room. Dream’s not-he’s not in a place to be sharing rooms with anyone, I don’t think.’

Tommy shrugged.

‘Guess he’s used to having alone time.’ He quipped weakly. George didn’t laugh. He looked at Tommy with tired, morose eyes, and *God it made Tommy feel guilty.*

‘Sorry,’ he apologised quickly. ‘That was...poor taste.’

George raised his eyebrows. ‘Little bit.’

There was another moment of silence, but George had continued before Tommy could make an excuse to leave.

‘You know he was tortured, right?’

The words hung in the air between them, bitter and blunt.

‘He couldn’t walk, when Phil found him. He didn’t speak for days. They used Techno’s entire supply of healing potions on him, and even then he could barely walk down the stairs without help. He still can’t wear anything heavier than leather armour. He’s-’

George cut himself off, sighing angrily, eyes blazing. Tommy had never seen him like that before.

‘So maybe you could hold off on the jokes. It makes you sound like a dick.’

Of course, Tommy had put two and two together about it, but hearing it said so plainly was...yeah. Something else.

‘I-yeah, okay. Sorry.’

George nodded tersely. ‘Goodnight, Tommy.’

And he’d continued to his room.

Tommy hadn’t ended up practising his archery, instead he’d sat on the steps to Techno’s back door and tried to process what had happened.

And now here he was, trying to talk about it, through a door, to Dream himself. Clearly something had changed.

He tries to gather his thoughts again.

'I'm better now. You're not scary anymore. You don't scare me.' Tommy pauses. 'But not just because I'm different. It's because you're different too, I think. I don't know what happened to you in prison, I really have almost no idea at all, but you shouldn't have had to deal with it.'

He hears a tiny squeak from the other side of the door.

'Nobody should have to go through anything like that.' He continues. 'And even though you were a complete fucking dick to me, and you ruined my life, I'm not- I'm just tired of fighting, Dream.'

There's a moment of silence.

'Is there...how come you're not speaking?' Tommy asks. 'It's fine that you aren't but I'd just like to know so I can monologue without leaving gaps for interjection.'

Dream is silent, but Tommy hears him take a deep breath, in and out.

'You-you know you *can* speak, right? Dream?' He tries cautiously.

Another moment of silence. Then Dream's hoarse voice carries through the door.

'I didn't know if I was allowed.'

Tommy swallows. *This is fucked*, he thinks, privately. But he manages to control himself.

'Why would you not be allowed to speak to me?'

'You told me to shut up.' Dream's voice is quieter and softer than Tommy remembers.

Did Tommy say that? It seems like something he would have said, probably in that first altercation in the living room.

'I didn't-yeah, I didn't mean forever, you dickhead.' Tommy breathes out.

'Sorry.' Comes the response.

'Don't apologise, holy shit.' Tommy feels like even more of an asshole now.

There's a moment of silence.

'I'm glad you're doing okay.' Comes the disembodied voice again.

Tommy has absolutely no idea what to say in response to that. He mumbles out a thanks, but it's so under his breath that he's sure that Dream doesn't hear it.

They sit there, backs separated only by the wood of the door, breathing the same air for a while longer. Tommy's just considering whether he should leave when Dream's voice breaks silence again.

'Can I say something?'

Tommy makes a positive noise in the back of his throat.

'I'm sorry, Tommy. I know it's not an excuse, but I can barely even remember half of what I was doing back then. George says I was ill, and I don't-I don't know if he's right, but I was definitely

not-not fully in control of myself.'

Tommy can hear now that Dream is crying.

'And I'm sorry. And I don't deserve your forgiveness, and I don't expect it. But I hope hearing this helps you.'

An audible gulp of tears.

'And if you wanted to hurt me, and take me back to prison, I wouldn't blame you. I probably deserve it. But please, don't bring the others into this. They-they're good. They're kind. I'm the one who should be punished.'

His voice trails off towards the end of his sentence, ending in a whisper. Tommy closes his eyes. Here it is. A confession of guilt, an apology, he finally has all the power. It feels fucking terrible. The words fall out of Tommy's mouth before he can stop them.

'God, Dream I-I- no, don't-you don't have to worry about the others. Or you. I'm not- they wouldn't let me take you to the prison if I wanted to. Which I don't, by the way.' He says hurriedly.

To forgive or not forgive?

Tommy doesn't even know where to begin. He's quiet for a long while, after the initial outburst, the silence is only broken by the occasional sniffs emanating from behind the door. Eventually, he gets his thoughts in a row long enough to conjure a shaky response.

'Thank you. I'm sorry about that happened to you. I know it wasn't all me but-but I should have been able to see that the prison wasn't fit for anyone.'

Tommy lets out a breath, and with it comes a wave of tears down his face. He can hear that Dream is crying harder now, but not speaking.

'You have a fucked-up idea of what you deserve, Dream. Nobody deserves to be-to be tortured. That's one of the ones everyone's meant to know, I think. Especially if you were...ill when you did all of it.'

He hesitant to use the word, but Dream doesn't sound like it bothered him.

'It's funny how it's ended with both of us in the same house, crying through a wooden door at each other.' Tommy quips, retreating to humour in the absence of any serious comment. He hears a quiet laugh, followed by a sniff.

'I guess.'

Tommy wipes his eyes.

'I'm glad I came. I'm glad I stayed.'

'I'm glad too.' He hears through the door.

'I'm not-we're not like, friends now, or anything,' he says hurriedly 'but if you want to come downstairs, it'd be nice to see you in the evenings, or whatever.' Yuck, it's got painfully awkward now. Tommy stands up.

'Thanks, Tommy.' He hears Dream's quiet words through the door. 'See you in a bit.'

‘See you. Also, Phil keeps over-catering and trying to force feed me and Techno. So if you could start pulling your weight again in that department, it would be appreciated.’ He squeezes his eyes shut in regret. *Why the fuck did he just say that.*

But to his surprise, Dream laughs. ‘Thanks, Tommy.’ He repeats.

And Tommy finds a small smile making its way onto his face. He turns and makes his way down the stairs.

That evening, as Tommy, Phil, Techno and George sit, playing word games aloud in the living room, their conversation is interrupted by the arrival of a nervous, exhausted looking Dream, who stands in the doorway awkwardly. He’s obviously unsure of where to go, fiddling with the sleeve of his jumper, and there’s a moment of shocked silence from everyone before Techno lifts his arm.

‘Come on, you must be cold.’ He offers. Dream gives him a small but relieved smile, and walks lightly over to him. He settles on the sofa, pulling his legs up to his chest with Techno’s arm curling around his shoulder lightly. The game picks up where it left off, and although Dream doesn’t contribute, the atmosphere is pleasant and light.

Tommy gives him a weak smile across the room, and Dream returns it.

Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

Confessions under bedsheets.

Chapter Notes

Hello! It's nearly time for THE chapter...you know the one I mean :)))) As I've been saying recently, I'm currently vvvv busy with moving house, uni work and my jobs so it's sadly quite likely that I won't be able to keep up the once every two days schedule, but I promise I'll try my best! And I'm definitely committed to finishing this fic, one way or another!!

As always, comments and kudos give me validation and motivation so pls feel free!

Warnings: Torture, vomiting

George's gaze keeps drifting to Dream. He's definitely dozing, head resting on Techno's chest and legs tucked up onto the sofa. He looks so small. George watches as his head dips a little, then jerks up as he wakes up again, blinking through his eyelashes.

George desperately wants to hug him. He has a twinge of jealousy in his chest as Techno tightens his arm around Dream's shoulder.

The game has mostly been abandoned, and Tommy's telling a story about him and Tubbo for Phil's entertainment.

Oh, Dream's looking at him. George, despite himself, feels a slight shiver as he meets Dream's eyes. He raises his eyebrows a little, an unspoken question.

Dream shrugs.

George jerks his head to the doorway.

Dream nods.

They both start to stand up, George brushing himself off and stretching, Dream removing Techno's arm from his shoulders and murmuring that he's tired.

'See you tomorrow.' George waves tiredly at the others, and leads the way out of the door, followed by Dream, who offers them a little smile, and closes the door behind him.

The two of them stand in the kitchen awkwardly. Dream is fiddling with his sleeves again. George isn't sure what to say, but opens his mouth anyway.

'Are you feeling better then?' He says, and then winces slightly at the unintentional harshness of

his tone. Dream flinches, almost unnoticeably.

He nods.

He's not talking to me, George realises. 'Sorry. I'm just glad you know who I am. I thought – there was a second, when I thought you might not recognise me.'

Dream gives him a sad look, and shrugs.

'Okay, well, I'm glad you're-yeah.'

Dream's still looking at him with sleepy eyes. George suddenly feels uncomfortable, itchy, like Dream's gaze is somehow making all of his clothes scratch at him. Does Dream judge him? For what he said? They'd said it before, before everything, but always played it as platonic. And then Tommy had got here, and they hadn't had a chance to talk about it. He shifts his weight, and looks towards the door.

'Okay, I'll be off then. Goodnight.' He's hardly taken a step when Dream, voice quiet but hopeful, makes George's heart clench.

'Will you stay?'

Their eyes meet. It's a moment George doesn't think he'll ever forget. He can recognise the Dream he's looking at, all of a sudden. It's like his friend is being rebuilt in front of him, and, George realises, while the Dream he'd hugged on his first evening was Dream too, this Dream is who he missed the most.

No mask, no scheming, no stressed tears and impulsive lashing out.

No pushing George away for his own safety.

This is the person he fell in love with.

Oh.

He's in love with Dream.

He already knew that. But now he's *knowing* it.

Dream's eyes are still boring into his. He's taken aback by how seen he feels, like Dream's stripped back all of his walls and fences, leaving him to be observed freely.

'Of course I'll stay.' He whispers back, hand coming up to cup Dream's face. He doesn't flinch, he just closes his eyes and leans a little into the contact.

'Come on.' George leads the way up the stairs and into Dream's room. They get ready for bed in comfortable silence, George taking off his boots and jacket with relieved sighs.

Dream just gets into bed – he's already in his pyjamas, after all.

They lie side by side, listening to the hoots of the local owls and the wind through the trees. The blinds are open and the moonlight illuminates the pair of them. George's hand inches closer to Dream, and a few moments, later, it's caught by Dream, who laces their fingers together deftly and squeezes.

'He burned me.' Dream says quietly. George turns his head a little. He can see that Dream's eyes

are glittering with tears, threatening to spill over.

‘That’s what it is. It’s-he has a brand that he uses, for the leather chairs in his casino, apparently. It’s a poker type of thing, on a long stick. He heated it up in the lava, cornered me in the cell and did it, then he spat on it. Then I think I threw up, I barely remember it, honestly.’

George rolls onto his side. ‘Dream...’ He’s not sure what to say. But he isn’t sure he needs to say anything at all, because this is very definitely something Dream needs to do.

‘I hate it.’ Dream spits. ‘I can’t look at it in the mirror. It makes me feel sick.’

He takes a deep breath.

‘I’m going to show them tomorrow.’

George squeezes his hand.

‘I’ll be there.’ He reassures him.

There’s a long pause as Dream collects himself. George is pretty sure he wants to keep talking, but he doesn’t know how to carry on. So he takes a risk.

‘Do you want to talk about the scar on your face?’ He asks quietly.

Dream lets out a shaky breath. ‘Is that okay?’

‘Yeah. Of course.’

‘Okay.’

Another pause. George can feel his heart beating out of his chest. This is possibly the most important conversation he’s ever had with Dream. This is him showing his vulnerability in a way that the old Dream would never have done. It’s critical that he doesn’t say the wrong thing.

But then again, a part of George wants to stop thinking so logically. He just wants to feel his friend’s trauma with him, and let him cry, and wail and do whatever else he needs to do.

‘He did it with the penknife that Sapnap bought him.’ George’s heart squeezes again.

‘Their matching ones?’ He asks, and Dream nods.

‘He was really slow about it. He wanted-he wanted me to give him the revive book.’

Ah. The fabled revive book. So that’s what this was all about.

‘Is that why he did all of this? For the revive book?’

Dream nods.

‘I didn’t tell him.’ He says, and a hint of pride is detectable in his voice. ‘I never said a word.’

Dream takes another shaky breath.

‘He did it really slowly, and he was talking the whole time about how easy it would be for me to just tell him. It took weeks to heal, because I wasn’t getting fed anything, really, just raw potatoes.’

His voice is quieter now, sinking to a whisper.

'It hurt.' It wrenches from his chest.

George stays silent, but moves slightly towards him, resting his head on Dream's shoulder. Anger is bubbling in him, alongside horror and most prominently, sadness.

They talk about the burns on his legs, about Quackity pouring lava onto him and leaving him to scream. They talk about the axe wounds – Dream recounts a horrifying story about Quackity making him choose where to be cut next.

George listens, trying to hold his emotions in, as his best friend, the centre of his universe, recounts his life in prison at the hands of Quackity. There's not much there that surprises him, while it still makes him feel sick to his stomach, he'd made assumptions and seen the scars.

Until Dream starts to talk about the rules.

'I wasn't allowed to talk, except to tell him about the book.' Dream recants. George leans onto him further.

'I did once, I begged him to stop. He dislocated my shoulder and tied my arm up behind me. He only let me out days later.'

There's a pause, as Dream's breath ghosts over them.

'He sewed my mouth shut.' His voice is high pitched and taut with tears, and George lets out a tiny, pained noise without even meaning to.

'You can see the scars.' Dream turns his head, and yes, in the moonlight, George can just see the little pinpricks around his mouth. They've healed to a silvery colour, but he can see they're jagged and rough.

'Dream,' His voice is rough, raw, *'he deserves to die.'*

'No he doesn't.'

'I'll kill him.'

'And then what?'

George opens, and then closes his mouth. Dream lets out a shaky breath.

'And then Sapnap and Karl can come after you? And then they kill you, and then I have to kill them and so on and so on? You said I deserved help, not punishment'

'It's not the same, Dream-'

'No, it is, George. The only difference is that-that it's me.'

George closes his eyes. This is too fucking much.

'Okay,' He concedes, *'can we talk about it in the morning, maybe?'*

He feels Dream's head nod.

They lie like that for a stretch of time – George can't say exactly how long, but his stomach does settle considerably, and his pulse goes back to normal.

Eventually, Dream drops off. His breathing slows, turning to soft snores that make George's heart ache with familiarity. He's got his head resting on George's shoulder now, and George gently moves his arm, now dead from Dream's weight, from underneath him.

He hesitantly, and ever so lightly, presses a kiss to Dream's hair, as tiredness seeps through him.

George and Dream sleep, uninterrupted and blissfully together, for the first time in a year.

They do not wake when the sun hits them through the blinds they'd left open. They don't even wake when Phil knocks on the door with breakfast for Dream.

It's only when rain, thick and cold, comes through the window and repeatedly hits Dream in the face that either of them stir.

Dream's momentarily confused by George's presence next to him. They'd shifted during the nights so that Dream's head now lays on George's chest, his arm resting gently on the small of Dream's back.

Dream carefully extracts himself, and goes to close the window. He takes a look around before he does. Techno and Tommy are training in Techno's garden, he can hear them yelling at each other. There's no sign of Phil, but he assumes he's up. The clock shows that it's past midday.

Despite the grey, dense skies, Dream takes a moment to appreciate his surroundings. The tall mountains are stunning, probably some of the most beautiful on the SMP. But when you look closer, they're jagged and cruel, rupturing from the earth with a violence that has impacted their form dramatically. Few trees or animals survive up there, they're mostly bare. Having said that, the forest does seem to be growing, finding a way into the peaks. Young, hardy trees are sprouting on the lowest ridges and valleys, around the edges of the lakes and rivers.

The forest itself is dark and intimidating, but Dream has been out hunting enough times that it feels comforting, not consuming to be in there now. It's teeming with life, everything from dormice to foxes to wolves, Phil even swears he's seen a polar bear.

Oh. This is home, Dream realises.

He's home.

The two of them walk down the stairs outside of Dream's room together. Thankfully, there's nobody who sees them, not that they're teenagers caught in each other's room, but because it would just be an awkward conversation for everyone involved, except perhaps Phil, who's probably dealt with it before.

They settle into the living room, talking lightly, but with the underlying tension apparent. He's telling them today. They're just arguing over who has to go out in the cold and get them, when Phil cuts their conversation short.

He wanders in, book in hand, and gives a little hello to them both, and then frowns.

'What's going on?' He asks. He's clearly perceived that *something* is up. Dream takes a deep breath, but before he can speak, George has replied.

'We have to talk about something. To do with the prison.'

Phil nods cautiously. 'Shall I get Tech?'

‘And Tommy.’ Dream adds, to Phil’s surprise.

‘Okay. I’ll be right back.’

They’re all gathered quickly, Techno and Tommy in their training gear and soaked through from the rain.

‘Get a towel first, Tommy!’ Techno complains, as he slumps onto the sofa, splashing water all over it.

‘Why? S’only water, it’ll dry.’

‘Because it’s not your sofa to drip onto.’ Techno rolls his eyes, drying off his hair.

‘No, it’s my Dad’s, basically the same thing.’

‘Guys.’ Phil warns, ‘enough.’

They fall silent, bickering forgotten. Dream gives George a panicked look.

‘What did you want to talk about, Dream?’ Phil asks, taking a seat by the table. Techno and Tommy’s attention turns to him too.

George puts a hand on his shoulder gently. Dream takes a shaky breath, and opens his mouth. The words are stuck in his throat – this goes against the rules, and he can’t shake the guilt, the feeling of impending doom that comes with it. His mouth is dry as he chokes out his confession, finally freeing himself. It makes his stomach churn, and bile rise in his throat, but he gets it out anyway.

‘Quackity did this to me.’

Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

Q.

Chapter Notes

Enjoy :) A know a lot of people wanted to see Techno rage out and I agree, but part of his character dev in this fic is coming to terms with the effect violence has on ones he loves. Hope this satisfies people!! Kudos and comments fuel my motivation so please leave one if you want to!

Warnings: Torture, references to vomiting

In hindsight, maybe Technoblade should have expected it to be Quackity. Someone manipulative, and self-serving. Someone willing to, say, drop an anvil on his enemy's head. Him and Quackity have a history of conflict, and this, Techno is sure, will further it.

He's not sure he's ever been this angry before. Now he has a direction to project his fury to, all the tied-up feelings he's been repressing for the sake of Dream threaten to burst out of his chest.

It's only been a few seconds since Dream spoke, but Techno's mind is already churning, as it is tends to do. While Quackity is undeniably cruel, and sometimes even seems to take pleasure in causing pain, Dream's statement leaves him with one question.

'Why?' His voice rings out, monotone and harsh through the room. Dream winces, and his eyes flick to George, who gives him a little nod of support.

'Have you ever heard of the revive book?' He asks quietly. It's met with a scoff from Tommy, followed by a moment of silence.

'Wait, is that real?' He asks in disbelief. 'I thought it was a ploy to stop-'

He cuts himself off. Everyone in the room fills in the end of the sentence for themselves.

To stop me from killing you.

Dream shakes his head. 'It's real.' He murmurs. 'Or it was, at least. I burned it. But I remember what was in it.'

It all makes a lot more sense now, Techno thinks. It wasn't random cruelty, it was targeted.

'What did he want it for?' Techno queries. He's holding back the emotions that are consuming his thoughts as he tries his best to get *context* and *understanding* before he reacts.

He knows that he needs to avoid reacting the way he would naturally – that is to say, explosive anger and immediate calls for blood.

Because that would not be good for Dream. And it's about Dream, not him.

'I don't know. Something to do with his casino, I think? He was-he was working very hard on it. He talked about it all the time.' Dream's voice dropped to a whisper.

Techno narrows his eyes. He wants to poke more, to ask about Quackity's motivations, but it's really not the time. He takes a deep breath, trying to control himself. He can hear Phil talking to Dream, and then Dream unbuttoning his shirt, and then-

Oh.

And then it all fucking explodes all at once.

Dream has a scar on his chest, in the shape of a 'Q'. Upon looking at it for longer, Techno recognises it as a burn. A very neat, very red burn, right below his collarbone, where it's easily hidden. Dream has his head turned away, as if he's dreading the response from the three of them. Techno glances at Phil, who's hand is at his mouth in horror, and Tommy, who, as Techno watches, gags, and then exits the room very quickly.

Dream rebuttons his shirt. Phil stands up, and very slowly approaches Dream, who watches with a scared expression, until Phil kneels down, and takes his hand. Techno can't hear what he's saying over the blood rushing in his ears, and it's probably perfectly phrased and kind and reassuring and *fuck, he's got to get out of here.*

Techno vaults over the sofa, stumbling out of the room and throws open the back door, gasping for air. The bright sunlight reflects off the snow into his eyes, making his squint, and he storms towards his back garden, sword already drawn.

He stands in the centre of his home-grown training ground for a few seconds, paralysed by indecision. *This needs to go*, he thinks, *this needs to stop right now*. He is burning up, he feels volatile, and that makes him a liability to those he loves.

Blood for the blood God, after all.

The training dummy that Phil had made for him is sliced in two pretty much immediately. He makes his way around it, striking at full strength with all of his fury behind the swings. After the dummy has been thoroughly obliterated, he moves onto the next. This one's wooden, with rotating limbs to help with dodging. He makes quick work of that one too.

He rampages through the training ground, desperately trying to quell the violence rising in his gut. He runs out of dummies, and moves onto the haybales they've been storing there. It's nothing, *nothing*, compared to how he will feel when he gets to do this to Quackity.

There's nothing he wants more.

And when he does eventually see through the red mist, and his head clears, he can do nothing but sit, in a state of shock, on his back doorstep and hold his head in his hands – which, he now notices, are stinging. He opens them and realises they're shredded. He's been gripping the handle of his sword so tightly that the rough surface, made to prevent it from slipping from his grasp, has sandpapered his hands.

Techno watches as beads of blood form in the lines of his palm, spreading across like trails on a map. Oddly, he finds it soothing, his breath slowing and the adrenaline finally releasing him from its grip.

Eventually, he collects himself enough to move. He staggers back into Phil's house on wobbly legs, dropping his sword onto the floor and leaning onto the kitchen table. He's finally able to spare a thought to Tommy, who had bolted out of the room.

But then he hears Dream's voice, quiet and wavering, from the living room. And despite himself, despite every bone in his body telling him to set off *right now and rip Quackity's fucking head from his fucking shoulders*, he takes a deep, deep breath, and relaxes his shoulders, and walks into the room, trying to exude calm. Or at the very least, not anger.

Dream is in the same place, but he's sunk into the sofa a little more. Phil and George are either side of him, and they're clearly in the middle of consoling him. Dream looks...haunted.

He looks up at Techno through his eyelashes, eyes a little unfocused. Techno takes another deep breath, and walks over to them. Engaging the empathetic part of his brain, he doesn't want to tower over him, so he sits down at Dream's feet. Struck with the need to be close to him, he gently rests his head on Dream's lap, because *fuck, he doesn't know how to handle this*, but Dream deserves to know that Techno's here.

That Techno, although he's awful at consoling people, is here for Dream. To protect him, sure, but also to be stable. To be secure. To make sure that Dream knows that he has a place *here*, with Techno and Phil, and the others too, if they want.

It only lasts a few seconds, before he lifts his head back, and settles back onto the floor. Dream seems to be lucid, which is better than Techno expected. It's been at least half an hour, so he expects Phil has been told everything Dream is willing to share.

The door opens. Tommy hesitantly peeks around the corner.

'I heard Techno coming in, is it-can I come in?'

Phil nods, and he joins them by the sofa. He sits on the floor next to Techno, and he's pale and shaking a little, and definitely looking nervous, Techno notices. He's sitting furthest from Dream himself.

There's a beat of silence, until Dream's quiet voice breaks it.

'I'm sorry I didn't tell you sooner, but it was one of his rules.' His speech is interspersed with forced exhales, like it's physically demanding of him to say it. Techno shakes his head.

'No, no apologies. You tell us whatever you want to, Dream.'

He's channelling as much '*Phil looking after a worked-up and traumatised child*' energy as he can. He remembers that when Wilbur would have his extended phases of grumpiness and antisocial behaviour, Phil would tell him that he can talk if he wants, but equally, if he *doesn't* want to, that's okay too.

'What do you want us to do?' Techno asks. A green flag to take Quackity's final canon life would be the easiest option, but he suspects that would upset Dream. He's right – Dream replies immediately.

'Don't hurt him, or anything. Please, Techno.'

Techno withholds a reply. He doesn't even know *how* to reply.

'Why not?' Tommy's rough voice sounds from behind him. 'Dream, this is-he's a maniac.'

Dream turns his head. 'It's better this way. Nobody has any revenge to be had.'

Tommy looks puzzled, a little, but then he nods.

'Whatever you want, Dream.' Phil reassures him.

The conversation continues slowly. Dream talks about the brand, and Tommy nearly has to leave again. Techno lets the words wash over his ears, and buries his anger and desire for revenge deep, deep in his stomach. They talk about Sam's role in all of this, Sapnap and Karl's too. George is just saying that he's pretty sure that the fiancés know what going on when Tommy interrupts them.

'They're not fiancés anymore. I don't think. Definitely not Karl.'

All of them turn to face him. George frowns. He's sure that's not right – he's seen Karl and Sapnap together before he'd left. Tommy can probably see his confusion in his face, because he continues his explanation.

'Karl's been missing for weeks now, and Sapnap's moved out of Las Nevadas. He's back in town now. I just-I don't know, I just assumed they'd had a blow out or something – I didn't-I didn't think it was gonna be about, y'know, Quackity doing-yeah.' He cuts himself off.

George almost doesn't believe him. The three of them had been so close, and so happy, but, he supposes, then again, he'd been asleep for half a year. Lots can change in half a year. He's suddenly struck with a lonely realisation that Sapnap probably doesn't even consider George a friend anymore – he hadn't even noticed George had been gone.

Oh.

Or had he?

George scrambles off the sofa, suddenly sure he can help shed light on this. Dream flinches, and his stomach clenches, but he's out the door and across to his room in Techno's cabin as fast as he can. *He'd muted it. Of course, he'd fucking muted it.*

He pulls open the bedside table drawer, and *yes*, there's his communicator. He'd thrown it in there on his first night, bitterly making sure it's out of his view. A red light flashes on the corner – new messages. He opens, and it beeps at him indignantly.

8 new messages:

Sapnap (7)

Karl (1)

His heart is racing. These are recent – as in, since he'd arrived in here. So Sapnap knows he's woken up – Karl too, by the looks of it. He almost wants to read them immediately, but honestly, he's scared to see what's in them. It could be threats – to both him and Dream, if they suspect George's involvement in his escape.

He doesn't want to face that alone.

Still catching his breath, he turns and carries his communicator back down the stairs, out the door and across the snowy path, back into Phil's living room. The group are talking quietly, but fall silent when he reappears.

‘The fuck’s got into you?’ Tommy asks, a hint of annoyance in his voice. George doesn’t reply, just holds up his communicator. It’s almost comical how quickly all of their faces change – Tommy and Phil’s to confusion, Techno’s to shock and Dream’s to somewhere between fear and curiosity.

‘Who from?’ George suspects Techno doesn’t need to ask – he’s picking up what George is putting down.

‘Sapnap, mostly, and one from Karl.’

‘So they know you’re awake?’ Tommy frowns. ‘Do they think you broke Dream out?’

George shrugs, trying to put up a façade of calm, when in fact, he feels like his heart is beating out of his chest.

‘Let’s find out.’

He opens the first message.

Did you wake up? I couldn’t find you when I came to visit today. Either that or someone’s kidnapped you ig. Come see me, things have changed a lot and im worried youre going to run into trouble. – S

Where are you? I’ve been to your house, and you’ve not been home in at least a week. Are you okay? Please let me know. – S’

Dude, where the fuck are you? – S

If you’re reading this, please George I need help. Karls disappeared, no idea where he’s gone. Q isn’t taking it well and everyone else is avoiding us because of it. I need you dude, things are fucked up rn – S

Q won’t stop talking about Dream. Idk whats happening anymore but I’m scared, hes acting like hes had a mental breakdown or something, he needs help. I miss you. – S

I hope you’re ok. – S

Q told me he doesn’t love me anymore. That’s that I guess. Him and Sam are always together, and they go off for days at a time. Do you ever just wish it was like the old days, just me you and Dream? Before all of this shit happened? Ik it’s stupid but I just want my life back. But instead I’ve got my heart broken and my two best friends are missing and in prison. This isn’t what I wanted. – S

I'll be back when it's over. I can't watch it happen. Please be kind to him. - Karl

Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

A revelation from Sapnap, and a realisation for Dream.

Chapter Notes

hello! here's a new chapter, enjoy. not only have I been incredibly busy, but this was also like. the hardest chapter to write for some reason? I enjoyed it but fuck dude. Anyway, enjoy! Also, I've had a few messages asking if it's ok to put my work in fic recommendation comps on tumblr/twitter/tiktok and i just thought i'd say UUH YES?!? vv flattering, tysm!! (please inflate my ego /j)
warnings: torture mentions, blood.

Dream doesn't know what to make of the messages. It conflicts with everything he thought he knew of Sapnap and Quackity. As far as he was aware, Sapnap had known, and presumably endorsed what Quackity was doing to him.

That was...

That was hard.

Knowing that Sapnap held so much distain, so much hatred, that he was happy to sit back and let him be tortured to near death. It was haunting. It had *hurt*.

And now?

These messages would indicate...otherwise? Sapnap sounds confused, and desperate. Like he doesn't know why Quackity is apparently so on edge. And the last one – reminiscing over the early days of the SMP, when Dream had first created this world, just for the three of them.

Wishing for a simpler time.

He called Dream his best friend.

What kind of person throws his best friend into prison and doesn't visit him for half a year?

His brain is spinning. And that's not even getting into the apparent break up between him, Karl and Quackity.

And Karl's message?

So many questions, and Dream doesn't know if he wants to think about them, let alone know the answer.

They're sitting at the kitchen table, everyone's expressions are clouded and serious. Phil's studying

George's communicator intensely, as if that will somehow reveal a hidden message. George has a thousand-yard stare, Techno is resting his head on his hands and thinking hard. Tommy is tapping the table agitatedly.

'Back at home, Quackity and Sam kept searching the forest in sections. They said they were looking for a dungeon but I guess that was a lie.' Tommy is uncomfortable, Dream can tell. 'I offered to help them, but they said no. They were pretty far out by the time I left, I mean...'

He pauses. There's a moment of loud silence as they all digest what the implications of that is. Techno's eyes move to look at him, disbelief evident.

'We're thousands of blocks away.' He intones, 'You can't seriously think that he's going to find us here.'

'They're pretty fucking desperate. S'only a matter of time, I reckon.' He replies, expression grim.

Dream's stomach churns. He can't help himself, he looks to the back door, as if Quackity's face might be staring back at him through the window. A shiver runs through him, and he takes a shaky inhale of breath.

He's not here. He can't be here.

Nobody knows where *here* is outside of this room. The forest is thick, the mountains are impassable, he is safe.

For now.

He turns his attention back to Tommy, who has started pacing now. He's buzzing with nervous energy, and it's spilling over into the room and affecting everyone else too. George is still staring blankly, but Dream can see he's shaking, just a little.

'You need to go, like, now.' Tommy sounds frantic. 'He's gonna find this place, I'm serious.'

Dream's heart rate is going steadily up. He almost wants to get up and go right now, disappear further into the wilderness. *He's not going back to prison. He's not ever seeing the inside of that cell again. He'd rather die.* Dream can feel himself spiralling and spiralling and –

Phil's voice interrupts him.

'Tommy, calm down, alright? We'd know if they were nearby, we'd have seen signs of them in the woods.'

'And it's not like they could take all five of us.' Techno inputs, still clearly thinking hard.

The sound of Techno and Phil's assurances somehow settle Dream's nerves a little, but-oh. George's hand is on his arm. He hadn't even noticed it, but he'd been digging his nails into his other forearm, little beads of blood forming. They're only welling up between his scars – the damaged tissue is too tough for him to break. It's a weird pattern, spotted here and there. George's eyes look concerned, and he gently tugs the offending arm away, and rests his hand over Dream's. It's grounding, and settles him even more.

Dream sees Tommy's eyes flick to their hands inquisitively, as Phil continues to talk strategy to Techno, but he doesn't say anything. Thank God for that, it would have been very awkward.

Dream squeezes George's hand, just a little. He feels George return it. And then they let go.

'Maybe I should reply to Sapnap?' George offers, entering the conversation. Techno's eyes narrow.

'That...might not be the worst idea. We can get some information out of him.' He says slowly.
'And if they are heading this way, we can get going.'

He looks to Phil, who nods approvingly. George pulls the communicator closer to him, and begins to type. His first attempt is written off by Techno as 'too suspicious', the second is 'too withdrawn', but by the third draft there's a hesitant consensus that it's alright.

I'm alive, what's happening? Are you okay?? I lost my communicator and had to get a replacement, sorry, I'm miles away now. Is Quackity okay? Where is he? – G

Phil hits send before they can argue about it more, and everyone around the table relaxes a little. Tommy leaves, muttering about getting a glass of water, and Phil starts to pick up the remnants of lunch from earlier. Dream would offer to help, even though he hasn't eaten yet today, but he's pretty sure if he stands up, he'll keel over. The worry is getting too much for him, but now he's sent it, they just have to sit and wait, and wait, and-

The communicator beeps.

Well then.

George scrambles to pick it up, but Dream is almost frozen in horror? Fear?

This is too fast, too fast, he's barely even had time to process telling the others about his scar and here they are, talking to Sapnap (Sapnap!?) about *him* and *oh God*.

George reads it out loud.

Oh my god I'm so happy you replied where r u?? idk where Q is, I think him and sam are out near the beach? I'm trying to stay away from him. can we meet up? I really need someone rn – S

Dream's heart clenches. He sounds desperate.

Cautiously, hesitantly, he allows himself to consider that perhaps Sapnap didn't know about what Quackity was doing to him. And then, just as quickly, he reels himself in.

Too much. Too much hope.

'Quackity could find it and read it.' Dream murmurs, and Techno nods.

'Exactly what I was thinking.' He intones, taking the communicator to read it for himself. 'We obviously can't say anything about where we are or that Dream is here. But maybe we can dig a bit more.'

There's a moment of silence.

'Ask if Quackity's dangerous,' George says plainly. 'If Sapnap's scared, then he must be acting really unhinged.'

Techno does. It beeps again after a minute.

He's fucking crazy, everyone avoids him now. Hes not been violent to me but people aren't happy, and some people think that dreams escaped and thats why theyre being so weird. If they carry on then theres going to be another war, tubbo's off ranting about nukes all the time and nobody knows where phil and techno are. Punz is sick of it, the egg is still fucking around out there somewhere,

and quackitys pretty sure they're responsible for whatever's pissed him off. Everyones on edge. Im camping out near kinoko rn bc I don't feel safe in my own fucking house. Just tell me where you are and we can come up with a strategy. Honestly youre the only person I trust bc you were asleep for too long to make plans to backstab me. -S

Dream's escaped? – G

Idfk, I don't think so but i haven't been to visit him in months. Nobody has, we're not allowed. – S

Allowed? – G

Sam says it's a security risk so we're not allowed to go visit him. ive been trying for months, he might be dead for all I know. Im pissed with sam but q said it was for the best. – S

All of them sit back. Dream can't cope with this. He can't even begin to cope with this. The others are talking, speaking over each other, and getting louder and louder and *absolutely fuck this*.

He quietly stands up and slips out onto the back porch. He's pretty sure the others don't even notice his disappearance, Tommy is talking animatedly to Phil and Techno, and George is rereading the messages, and Dream, quiet at the best of times, is not missed.

He sits underneath the stars and he thinks.

He thinks of Sapnap, looking up at the very same sky, camped out near what was meant to be his safe place.

He thinks of the three of them, Sapnap, Karl and Quackity, and how fucking in love they had been. If Dream hadn't had whatever was happening with George, he would have been so jealous of their closeness.

He wonders exactly what's driven Quackity to burn all of that to the ground. He never worked out exactly what drove his descent into depravity, but Dream knows it wasn't worth it. Not just because he never got the revive book, but because nothing, *nothing*, would be worth more than his fiancés.

Quackity is not in his right mind, Dream is sure of it now. Maybe he caught it from Dream, maybe it's the same affliction.

Maybe it's the fucking server itself, cursed to always contain one person who hurts so much that they burn away everyone they love – first it was Wilbur, then Dream, and now Quackity.

He looks up to the sky again.

Dream thinks of the first few seconds he'd been out of prison. Those droplets of cold rain hitting his face, the constellations, bright above him, the first inhale of cold air. Again. His mind reminds him that he's looking at those stars again tonight, just like Sapnap.

He doesn't cry.

He probably should, he thinks, but he doesn't, because he is trying to pull himself together enough to finally draw the conclusion he's been coming to since he left the prison.

He must go back to the SMP.

This needs to end.

He gives himself another few minutes of enjoying the cold air that curls around his face, and just as he's about to turn and tell the others about his plan, he feels the door behind him open. Techno is staring down at him, one eyebrow raised.

Dream feels a surge of panic, like he's been caught doing something he shouldn't. He beats it down, wondering if this will ever stop happening. Quackity has made him like this, he doesn't know if it can be unmade.

'Hi,' Techno says quietly, 'Can I sit?'

Dream nods, shuffling over to make room for him. Once Techno has settled, Dream finds himself leaning onto his shoulder lightly.

'What are you thinking, Dream?' His voice is soft, and calming. Dream blinks away the tears, and turns his head into Techno's shoulder with a sigh.

'I can't let another war happen.' He whispers.

Techno nods. 'What are you gonna do about it?' He asks, although Dream can tell by his tone that it's not really a question. Techno knows him too well.

'We gotta go back.' He murmurs. 'I'm going to have to see him again.'

Techno's arm wraps around his shoulders firmly.

'Yes. But you're not alone this time.'

Dream closes his eyes.

He's not alone this time.

Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

Preparations for the hike.

Chapter Notes

Enjoy :) I'll just say that this one felt very hard to get right, and I hope you all like it. As always, comments and kudos motivate me to work (adhd brain needs feeding) so if you'd like to pls do!
Warnings: none, this is pure fluff

George is struck by how efficiently everything starts falling into place. He supposes it makes sense – Phil, Techno and Tommy had been long term travellers before they'd settled in the SMP, never really staying in one place too long, that's what had made them so close. But seeing them almost read each other's minds while packing up for their overnight trek is impressive, to say the least.

As soon as the decision to travel to the SMP to confront Quackity, and hopefully prevent another war, is made, Phil gravitates to the kitchen, wrapping up what food he has ready into parcels for each person, writing the recipients name on them once he's tied it up. The house fills with the smell of yeast and fresh bread, and George overhears Tommy telling Phil to stop baking, because *we have enough Dad, good God it's only a three night hike at most!*

Tommy sorts out the rucksacks – he produces an assortment from the tiny cupboard under the stairs, somewhat miraculously. Tommy, Techno and Phil obviously have their own, although Tommy complains that it's too tight on his shoulders now. Dream is given Wil's old one, which George notices makes all of the others slightly misty eyed, Phil especially.

Dream is still using Wilbur's clothes, although they fit significantly better now than they did when he first arrived at the houses. And now he's using Wilbur's rucksack, decorated with patches from places he'd been. Somehow it feels more intimate, more invasive to use it. But Phil smiles, and says that Dream looks good, and that he's glad it fits.

Tommy looks a little faint, but nods too. Then he busies himself fixing up the packs. George is given a spare one that they'd dug out, half falling apart, but Tommy had sewed it up until it was very usable. He's adjusted the others too, making them comfortable and unlikely to bruise the carrier's hips or shoulders.

Techno, predictably, is seeing to weaponry and armour. Four days after they begin preparing to leave, George is gifted a light set of netherite armour, which he is stunned by. Netherite is either expensive to buy, or incredibly dangerous to mine, and he's very rarely been able to keep hold of a set for long. It's enchanted too, decked out to the fullest. Techno waves off his gratitude, and hands him a sword and axe to boot. George examines the blades, skilfully honed to fine point, and wretchedly sharp. Techno warns him to be careful, but George can already see that these are probably the best made, and most deadly weapons he's ever held. He treats them reverently, like

they are relics that will shatter with too much force. In reality, he is almost scared for his own safety.

Dream, comparatively, takes to his own new weapons like a duck to water. Techno has smithed them just for Dream – with a hook in the hilt that secures the sword onto his hand, to compensate for his lost grip strength. His armour is also adjusted – extremely light, with more support in the ankles and greater flexibility to offset the reduced weight. Techno and Dream can't help themselves but test out the new kit.

George has seen, even fought alongside Dream at his prime, who would cut down opponents with terrifying speed and accuracy. Now, watching him spin and tumble through the air opposite Techno, who, just for a second, looks unsure of what to do, George sees the ferocious warrior again. It's electrifying, and George can see that Dream is exhilarated too. He has a fire in his eyes that reminds George of their manhunts and games, fiercely competitive and vigilant, looking for any weakness or misstep to exploit.

George sometimes forgets how dangerous Dream was. *Is*. While his stamina lasts, he matches and occasionally surpasses Technoblade's skill, courtesy of the new techniques he's cultivating with his unique equipment.

They spar for the whole week leading up to their departure. There's a lot of manual labour for everybody, fixing up neglected fences and saving what they can of the harvest before it's frosted over. The valuables from the houses are stored in a cave, a few hundred blocks away. The windows are boarded up, lest something break them and let the snow in. George spends a lot of time collecting firewood, so they have some to come back to. They don't know how long it will be until they return, and the depths of midwinter is not a good time to be looking for dry fuel.

George only realises on the fourth day that he's assumed without question that he will be coming back, a revelation that he tries not to consider too deeply, because *god, how things have changed*.

He could barely recognise Phil's face from a crowd when he first arrived, cloak pulled up against his face and toes freezing from the leaks in his boots. He and Techno had been cautious friends-of-friends at best. Now he thinks of them with such great affection that he doesn't even want to entertain the idea that they'll be parting soon.

Overall it takes about ten days to get as ready as they will ever be. They monitor the forest throughout, and no signs of Quackity or anyone else appear. The days get darker and the nights get longer, and when the final log has been chopped and rucksack packed, they settle in for their final afternoon and evening before they set off.

George is checking his rucksack over once more, just in case he's overlooked anything essential, when Tommy's shadow falls over him. He looks up, giving him a friendly smile, which is returned.

'Is it alright? I haven't had to sew properly since, like, L'Manburg was still around.'

George stands up, dusting his hands off.

'It's perfect. I had no idea you were so good at stuff like that.'

Tommy shrugs. 'Gotta do what you gotta do. Wil and Techno never had the patience, and Dad's hands started shaking a bit when he got older, so I got landed with all the mending. I got a bit addicted to it, actually, it's very therapeutic if you get good enough at it.'

George huffs out a laugh, picturing Tommy frantically sewing, surrounded by darned socks and elbow patches.

‘How are you feeling, then?’ Tommy asks, and George actually has to think about his response for a second.

‘Nervous,’ He says slowly, ‘but not for me. For Dream.’

Tommy tilts his head. He has his eyebrows furrowed, and clearly a question on his mind that he’s not saying. George rolls his eyes.

‘What?’ He asks, a hint of teasing in his voice.

‘I just-are you-you and Dream, huh?’ Tommy stutters rapidly, turning away from George’s gaze. ‘What’s going on with that?’

Oh-Oh no no no, he’s absolutely not talking about this to Tommy. Tommy?! Tommy has noticed?

George can feel a blush creeping up his face.

‘I wouldn’t-aha, um, I, that’s not...’ He trails off awkwardly, not even sure how to respond. Tommy lets out a forced laugh.

‘Forget I asked that.’ He says quickly. ‘Let’s just-yeah. Not my business!’

They make eye contact, and there’s a moment of awkward silence.

Then both of them burst out laughing.

‘I just wish I could give you an answer.’ George manages to get out between his giggles.

It’s such a weird moment, but somehow, it makes sense. They’re on the eve of war, potentially, and all logic dictates they should be strategizing around a table with maps and models, not sitting in the stairwell laughing themselves silly. But they are, and it feels good. Any residual tension between the two of them dissolves, and by the end, George feels infinitely more relaxed. They talk for a while longer, not about George and Dream, thankfully, but about Phil and his neurotic baking, the flock of crows that he tamed last year that still follow him around now. They talk about Techno, and how scared George was of him, and Tommy tells him stories of when he was younger, and Techno would let him ride on his shoulders.

Tommy tells him that he’s excited to see Tubbo. George says he’s dreading seeing Sapnap.

Eventually, they drift away, Tommy to his room and George to the porch for a moment of fresh air, but their conversation leaves a warm feeling in George’s chest. It’s late afternoon now, and the sun is just beginning to set. The sky is beginning to take on the fantastical colouring of a dying day, and George, although he’s barely spent four hours away from him, finds himself craving Dream’s company. It’s probably because he’s beginning to wind down for the night, which, a year ago, is something he would probably have done with Dream.

He doesn’t examine the part of his brain that is telling him that he wants to go and see Dream for other, much less nostalgic reasons.

He comes back into the house, wiping his boots on the mat, before kicking them off and closing and locking the door behind himself. He makes his way up the uneven stairs to Dream’s attic room, knocking on the door.

A voice tells him to come in, so he does. Dream's sitting on the windowsill, legs dangling out over the roof below him. His eyes are closed against the golden sunlight streaming onto his face, hair pushed back off his face and hands gripping the ledge. His breath puffs out in clouds of steam, condensing in the cold air.

He looks so beautiful.

George spares a moment to take in the scars on his arms and face, the Q now visible slightly under his shirt, which he has unbuttoned at the top. They almost glint in the sunlight, the taut, shiny scar tissue, and George realises he's become accustomed to their presence- well, maybe accustomed is too strong – but certainly he doesn't get the same pit in his stomach as he used to when he sees them.

He clambers onto the dresser, and climbs out onto the windowsill next to Dream. There's plenty of space, but they remain close to each other anyway. Slowly, George hooks his foot around Dream's ankle. It's a simple gesture, but it makes George's breath hitch a little when Dream moves closer into it.

Dream turns to face him. George looks out to the sunset, because if he looks at Dream he isn't sure he'll be able to keep up the pretence.

He's sure Dream can tell what he's thinking. They've always been like that, almost telepathic when it comes to each other's feelings. So he's not surprised when Dream takes his hand gently.

'I'm with you until the end,' George whispers, hoping it carries above the wind and the birds. 'No matter what happens, I'm with you.'

George feels Dream squeeze his hand tightly.

'I love you.' He says, eyes fixed to the top of the tree line.

Dream is still looking at him. He can't, *he can't*, because he is scared of what he will see in Dream's eyes. He's a coward, and he would rather sit here and watch the swallows swoop and dive, swoop and dive.

'George,' Dream's voice is soft.

He still doesn't meet Dream's eyes. Dream's hand leaves his, and comes up to his face, cupping his jaw and gently brushing his hair behind his ear. George leans into it.

'Can I...?' He asks, and George nods, finally giving in and letting Dream turn his head.

He's looking at me like I'm the most beautiful thing on the planet.

Dream's other hand comes up to his face too, and he leans in. With the trees stretching out distantly in front of them, and the sound of birdsong in the air, Dream kisses George beneath the endless sky.

It's soft, and gentle, and George can feel his heart beating out of his chest. This feels like making up for lost time. This feels like Dream is here, real, and warm, and George feels complete again, all of a sudden.

And then it's over, and Dream is pulling away. George chases it without even meaning to, and Dream smiles, leaning in and giving him a quick peck on the lips.

'I love you too.' He murmurs, leaning his forehead against George's for a moment, before leaning back.

They sit there, maybe they talk more, maybe they don't, it doesn't really matter anyway.

Because Dream, like always, has George, and now George, finally, has Dream too.

Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

The hike begins.

Chapter Notes

Enjoy :) Rly liked getting back to Techno's POV! As always, kudos and comments are highly appreciated!!

Warnings: blood, injury

Techno wakes up first. This is expected. He climbs out of bed after a relatively sleepless night, but he isn't tired. He feels a weird, sinking sense of dread in his stomach, something which he recognises normally precludes a conflict. He dresses in his travelling clothes, double layered and flexible clothing, made for regulating heat and allowing full range of movement. He's sure they'll run into some adversity on this journey, and Techno, for one, will not be caught off guard by rough terrain.

His sword and axe are slotted into his belt, sharp edges covered by their scabbards, and his crossbow is slung across his back, next to his quiver.

He takes one deep breath in, and one deep breath out again.

I am not prepared for this.

But I am going to do it anyway.

He doesn't like not having a plan – strategy is his forte, and walking into a conflict completely blind to not only how prepared his opponents are, but also where he will face them, digs deep into his anxiety.

Techno can hold his own against any individual on the SMP, but he would be a fool to assume it will be as fair a fight as that.

Instead, he's more concerned for the others – Tommy, in particular, concerns him. He may be engaging in a fight to the death against his friends, neighbours. It all depends on where the rest of the SMP stand when it comes to Quackity. He hopes that Tommy will make the decision to stand with his family, should he be faced with it, but Techno isn't sure of anything anymore.

Techno exits his room, locking the door behind him, and heads over to Phil's. It's a beautiful morning, clear skies and a cool wind, with the crunch of frost sounding from under his boots. Techno unlocks Phil's house, and takes a seat at the kitchen table with his rucksack between his legs, adjusting and rearranging his pack endlessly.

He's struggled to find the perfect way to pack his rucksack for nearly a decade and a half, since he

joined Phil and the boys on their travelling. Every time he thinks he's solved it, all of a sudden he needs to get to his ice pick, or his health potions, and he's left unpacking and repacking his entire bag so he can continue. Eventually he gave up, but it does make for an excellent nerve settling activity as he waits for the rest of the house to stir to life.

After a few minutes, Dream and George appear through the door to the hallway, rubbing their eyes and yawning. Techno nods hello, and Dream waves at him.

'G'morning.' Dream's voice is croaky – they have probably woken up only minutes ago. Techno watches as George gently leans against Dream as they make breakfast. 'Do you want anything?'

Techno shakes his head. He doesn't eat in the mornings, it makes him feel ill, especially if he's nervous. The pair of them bustle around, and a glass of water is deposited at Techno's elbow as they sit, jam and toast and a cup of coffee in front of each of them.

Phil appears after a little while, and goes through similar motions, quickly followed by Tommy, who gets Phil to make him breakfast at the same time.

They eat in silence, and wash up with only a few remarks passed between them. Clearly, everybody is tense today, and light conversation isn't on anyone's mind. They buckle up their rucksacks, and Techno automatically goes to help Dream with his, but it's unneeded – Dream has shouldered his pack smoothly and seemingly easily. He gives Techno a thumbs up when he sees him staring, and Techno returns it, surprised.

But it's only momentary, and his attention is quickly taken by Phil, who opens the door and holds it open for the four of them to file out.

Techno takes one last look at their home, their sanctuary, their makeshift hospital, their farm, their everything, really.

And then he turns and follows the figures ahead of him into the darkening woods.

The weather stays remarkably clear. Techno starts to wonder if it's a sign from the universe that they're on the right track, and their spirits start to lift out of nervousness and into a chirpy determination that has them chatting and joking, interspersed with serious conversations about strategy.

They lean heavily on Tommy and George's knowledge of the social happenings of the SMP. There's nobody they have down as an enemy for certain, except for Quackity and Sam of course, and there's potential allies in many people.

Tubbo, Tommy says, will probably hear them out at least. Niki and Ranboo, of course, will oppose Quackity's tyranny strongly, by nature of their involvement in The Syndicate. Techno keeps that thought to himself, though.

Sapnap remains a question unanswered, and Techno sees both Dream and George look away awkwardly whenever his name is mentioned.

By the time they come to the end of their day's trek, their spirits are high. A clearing appears conveniently in their path, an excellent campsite for cowboy camping on a rainless night, and they've more than covered the ground they needed to. The group begins to settle - Phil and Tommy are deep in a joking argument about the validity of mushroom foraging as a sustainable food source, George is already setting up his bedroll, and Dream is stretching out his ankle while perched on a fallen tree.

‘How is it?’ Techno asks gruffly, dropping his pack onto the ground with a thump. Dream looks up.

‘A bit sore, but alright. It’s holding up pretty well.’ He rolls it once more, before stretching out the other leg.

‘Are you coping okay?’ Techno queries. He’s kept an eye on Dream throughout their walk, and he’s kept up well. The only instance of concern was on a scramble up some loose shale, which Dream took extremely slowly and carefully.

Dream nods. ‘I’m okay. I feel good, really good. I think all that sparring was great for my stamina, it’s just the uphill bits I’m having any issues with.’

‘Good thing it’s mostly easy going from here.’ Techno replies, lying down flat on his back, stretching out his back on the soft grass, letting out a relieved sigh. The single cloud visible in the sky drifts lazily across his vision.

It’s chilly but dry, and the sunlight is keeping him from shivering. He’s just zoning out, eyes glazed and thoughts wandering, when Dream plonks himself down next to Techno with a thud. Techno feels Dream rest his head on his shoulder.

‘Are you okay?’ Comes Dream’s voice, quiet and sounding a little concerned.

Techno nods. ‘I’m alright. Just apprehensive. I don’t like not having a plan.’

Dream shifts a little.

‘If it’s any consolation, Quackity won’t have a plan either. It’s not like he’s expecting me to turn up with two of the best fighters on the server, George, who everyone thinks is hibernating, and Tommy, who hated my guts until about a month ago.’

Techno blinks. Dream is right, of course, this is very unexpected. And it does settle his nerves a little. But still. He’d feel better if he knew more.

Phil starts setting up the pot for hot water, and they begin to settle down together to eat their sandwiches with a cup of tea (or hot chocolate, in Dream’s case). George drifts off to sleep almost immediately afterwards, and the others follow soon, exhausted and looking forward to the warm comfort of their sleeping bags. They haven’t bothered with a tent, just sleeping under the open sky. Techno keeps watch for a few hours, and then Tommy takes over. They report nothing, and the weather even holds until the next day, which is much of the same.

Dream’s ankle holds up very well, considering how fast they’re walking, and it feels like the forest itself is shifting to make paths for them to pass through easily. Techno swears there’s a bog around here somewhere, but there’s no sign of it, only soft, spongy ground beneath their feet. They pass by clear, clean looking streams from the mountains when they are thirsty, and find themselves in patches of sunberries when they are peckish.

It almost feels like somebody is watching over them, guiding them through the forest. Phil in particular seems at peace, content with wandering through the forest a few feet ahead of the group. Techno thinks he catches Phil talking out loud, but when he asks, his question is brushed off.

But eventually, the forest must come to an end, and with the terrain difference comes a change in the weather. It builds for the whole afternoon, everybody getting goosebumps and static-y feelings in their hair. The air feels heavy, and warm, so it’s no surprise that, at around 7pm, the weather finally breaks, unleashing a torrential downpour onto the group.

It threatens to soak through everything, and the five of them end up huddled together under the cover of a huge mushroom, which smells odd but does the job of keeping them dry.

Techno is glad for the rest. He's rapidly running out of mental processing time, and at the pace they're keeping they'll be in the SMP a day earlier than they expected. He drops his rucksack to the ground and sits down next to it with a thud. The others collapse too, and there's a comfortable silence as the rain sounds around them. Techno rests his hand on his sword out of habit, but closes his eyes.

They wait out the worst of it under the mushroom. Techno has come up with a few new strategies to employ situationally, and it's settled his nerves a little more. It might seem like an exercise in futility, but he's grasping at straws when it comes to preparation for this journey. The others have begun chatting, as the ever-smaller raindrops begin to fall infrequently, and Techno opens his mouth, begins to say that they should get going, when he hears it.

A rustle in the leaves, a sharp intake of breath. All very subtle, all very easy to overlook. If Techno hadn't been listening for it, he would likely have missed it.

There's a human nearby. He holds out his hand to the others, who fall silent, although with confused looks. Techno pulls his sword from its scabbard, and stands up smoothly. Phil and Dream follow his lead, both drawing their weapons and scanning the trees around them. It's a wood, not a thick forest, and Techno feels vulnerable. Tommy and George have caught on now too, weapons raised. They remain like this for thirty seconds or so, and Techno is wondering if he's made a mistake, when a sharp sob rattles through the air, making all of them jump. The entire group can hear it, and they turn to see where it came from. Techno is already on his way, making a beeline for a boulder about thirty feet away. In the corner of his eye, he can see Phil following him, Tommy picking up his rucksack, and, weirdly, George and Dream staring at each other, expressions filled with disbelief.

Techno doesn't have time to wonder why – he rounds on the boulder, ready to run through whoever was spying on them, when he hears George's voice ring out, desperate, and serious.

'Techno stop!'

It stalls him. He shifts his body weight, landing to the side of the rock and he hears a scared noise from below him and – oh.

He recognises Sapnap immediately.

His leg is bleeding, severely, but he looks lucid and terrified. He has his bandana tied just above his knee, clearly an attempt to quell the blood, but it's ineffective.

Techno blinks.

Then he takes a step back. Phil is here now, on the other side of the boulder.

'If you're going to kill me, do it quick. I'm sick of losing blood.' Sapnap's words would convey pride, but Techno can see he's scared, eyes darting between him and Phil.

Techno hears the others approaching, and with that, decides that this is a situation he'd better leave alone.

Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

Sapnap and Dream meet again.

Chapter Notes

Hello! I really enjoyed writing this one, so I hope you enjoy it too! Sapnap can be really hard to get right, so I hope he lives up to people's expectations. As always, comments and kudos are much much appreciated, so thank you if you leave one!

Warnings: Blood, injury, mentions of disordered eating, flashbacks, torture

Dream's knees feel weak. He can barely walk the short distance to the boulder, despite the urgency in his heart to *move, move*, because *it's Sapnap, and he's hurt*.

Once again, his emotions are in turmoil, bouncing between the pit of his stomach and his throat, making him feel nauseous. He can feel bile rising in his throat, blood roaring in his ears as he approaches the rock. He can see Sapnap's blood, soaking into the ground beneath his feet. He's bleeding *so much*, Dream almost wants to rush over to him at the moment and force healing potions down his throat.

Sapnap is lying, propped up against the boulder, eyes upwards to the sky. Techno is standing back, sword still raised, but held loosely. He clearly doesn't know what to do. Phil is already kneeling at Sapnap's side, applying pressure to his leg. He still hasn't seen Dream.

George rushes past him, skidding to a halt and dropping to his knees at Sapnap's side. Dream can barely hear their words over the noise in his ears. He's only a few metres away now, and George is hugging Sapnap, who looks so shocked that his jaw has gone slack and –

Their eyes meet.

And Dream suddenly takes two, three and then many more steps backwards. His body is carrying him without instruction from his consciousness. Sapnap's eyes are familiar – the last things he'd seen before the lava dropped for the first time, glowing through the darkness as the platform landed on the other side. They had been dancing with fury and flames, growing smaller and smaller as he'd walked away.

Leaving Dream to his fate. Alone, isolated, terrorised and vulnerable.

Sapnap had left him there.

Sapnap had condemned him to this. Sapnap had made him like this. Sapnap could have stopped it.

But he didn't.

By the time his consciousness regains control, Dream doesn't even know where he is. He's

panting, quivering, and he drops to his knees in exhaustion. He feels his heart racing, but the adrenaline has run most of its course, and now he's shaking uncontrollably as he sobs into the patch of clover he's found himself in.

His throat is raw, his eyes sting horribly. Still, he weeps. He doesn't know how long for.

It's as though he's experiencing the betrayal all over again.

Before, he'd raged, and screamed and vowed revenge and death upon every last one of them. He'd been furious, filled to the brim with anger and violence, ready to obliterate anyone who was stupid or brave enough to stand before him.

Now, he feels unbearably, gut wrenchingly scared.

Sapnap was his best friend.

And Dream is terrified of him.

Even wounded, even defencelessly lying on his back in the middle of nowhere, weaponless and vulnerable, Dream can only see the eyes disappearing into the darkness of the prison.

Tommy finds him. He's managed to pull himself together enough to stop crying, and find a tree to lean against, but when Tommy's voice rings out in recognition, it still scares him. He can see the worry in Tommy's eyes as he flinches away from him, and maybe a little hurt too. Tommy slows down, approaching with caution, and sits down about a metre and a half from him.

'What's going on? What was that?' Tommy sounds incredulous. 'I thought you wanted to see Sapnap?'

Dream feels a shock of adrenaline at Sapnap's name. He shifts uncomfortably, avoiding Tommy's eyes. He grips onto his knees tightly.

After a few seconds, Tommy's voice sounds again, nervously this time.

'You can speak, if you want to.'

Oh.

Dream can feel his shoulders relax slightly. He hadn't even realised it but yes, he was abiding by the rules again. It brings a wave of nausea so intense he gags.

Tommy looks even more concerned now.

'I'm okay.' He gets out, throat still tight. 'It's-I'm alright.'

Dream consciously drags his shoulders down, unfolds his legs from their defensive position, up against his chest. He wonders for a second if this was what Phil calls a flashback.

Tommy is peering at him curiously, clearly on the edge of saying something but not quite sure what. Dream clears his throat.

'I just-he was-he took me *there*. I remembered it-when-when I saw him.' He stammers out, hating the way his voice is shaking. The final word comes out as a half sob, harsh and high pitched. He lowers his head again.

A second later, he feels Tommy's arms wrap around him. It makes him tense, for a second, until he realises what's happening. Then it's calming, and comforting. It reminds him of how far he's come, how far they all have.

'I can't believe we did it to you, Dream. I can't-like I would never, *never*, do that again, ever. I'm so fucking sorry, man.' Tommy's words are fast, whispered with such strong emotion that Dream doesn't doubt them for a second.

And then the pressure is gone. Tommy looks embarrassed. Dream meets his eyes, gives him a little nod of gratitude.

They walk to the group in silence, most of the way. Dream is shocked at how far he'd managed to run, stumbling over tree roots and streams. It's a good half hour walk back. Everyone is congregated around a small clump of trees hidden in a dip in the landscape. A tactically sound location, Dream thinks. Techno probably told them where to relocate to. Sapnap has Tommy's bedroll under his head, and his leg elevated on a stack of George and Tommy's rucksacks. Techno is nowhere to be seen, but Phil and George are talking quietly, sitting either side of Sapnap, who appears to be asleep. Dream, with a wave of relief so intense it almost knocks him off his feet, can see his chest rising and falling gently.

The others greet him with so much relief, Dream feels guilty for running away, even though he didn't mean to. Phil hugs him for so long and so tight that Dream is half convinced that he will never let him out of his sight ever again. George doesn't hug him for long, but he grips onto his hand with such ferocity that Dream can tell he was in a panic.

Sapnap is, in fact, asleep, helped along by a healing potion and a sleeping potion. According to George, he had thought Dream was a hallucination, and from there, had convinced himself everyone else was too. They'd had to knock him out, for everyone's safety. He looks pale and thin. His face has lost all its softness. Dream looks at Sapnap and sees himself, in the mirror, that day he woke up in Phil's spare room.

The four of them talk, of course they do. Tommy monologues for minutes at a time, coming up with every possible explanation for Sapnap's injury, and his reason for being so far away from his home. Phil gives them both a run down of his injury – that it's serious but not *serious*, and that he will mostly need time and rest, rather than any specific treatment. Healing potions are excellent at stimulating the replenishment of blood, and that's 90% of the recovery. George is quiet, only saying things when directly asked. Mostly, he stares at Sapnap, eyes wide, hand squeezing Dream's tightly.

Techno reappears after an hour or so. He'd been scouting the area, looking for Dream, but also for anyone else too.

'No traps, not as far as I can see.' He reports gruffly. He spares a look at Sapnap, who is twitching a little in his slumber, and then sits down on his pack. 'What are we doing with this one, then?'

George – who, up until this point, has been mostly silent, lifts his head. 'I think Quackity did it to him.' He says, voice a little scratchy from disuse. 'I think Quackity caught him.'

It's met with a resounding silence. *It does make the most sense*, Dream concludes, after thinking about George's words. Of all of the theories they've come up with, this one explains the most facts, the most convincingly.

'I think we should see what he has to say.' Phil chips in. It's met with nods from all of them, except Techno, who's face remains impassive. Phil raises his eyebrows.

‘We don’t know who’s side he’s on. That’s all.’ He shrugs. ‘We need to be careful.’

George’s grip tightens on his hand. He’s holding in anger, Dream can tell.

‘Let’s wait until he’s awake.’ Dream says. And Techno, after a second, nods his assent.

They aren’t travelling anymore today. It’s been enough excitement and all of them are exhausted. They’ve already moved from where they found Sapnap, so if it’s a trap, it will spring on an abandoned boulder.

Dream isn’t there when Sapnap wakes up. He is returning from his water collection trip, hungry and ready to dig into whatever Phil has prepared, when he sees the back of Sapnap, black hair long and wild, a blanket over his shoulders, sitting between Phil and George. Dream freezes. He can’t help it. Tommy sees him, and nudges Techno, who looks up, and then the other three are turning around and-

There are those eyes again.

Dream nearly drops the water bucket he’s carrying. Sapnap is staring directly at him, eyes wide and disbelieving, mouth open as if he’s about to say something. He shakily gets to his feet, hand on George’s shoulder as he does

Walk.

Walk!

His brain urges him, and he does – slowly, one foot in front of the other, until he’s face to face with Sapnap. He hugs the water bucket to his chest, if he didn’t it would be spilling all over the ground, because he feels weak, and shaky and this is so much harder than he imagined.

‘Your face...’ Sapnap whispers, hand coming up as if to trace the scar on his jaw. Dream flinches away, violently. Sapnap’s hand goes to his mouth, and he flinches again. It’s reflex.

There’s a long, long silence.

‘Are you afraid of me?’ He asks, voice barely audible.

Dream nods slowly. He swallows. He can’t speak. He won’t speak, he isn’t allowed to speak-

‘Dream,’ His voice cracks. ‘I-,’ He looks horrified, and takes a deep breath. ‘Dream...’

It feels like the word punched him in the gut. Dream feels winded, like all of the air has left his lungs in a rush.

This is not how he expected this to go.

Sapnap reaches out again, fingers outstretched as if to make sure Dream is actually there, real and solid. Dream feels a wave of sharp panic, and he stumbles backwards, water spilling out of the bucket and onto the ground. Techno stands up, sword already in hand.

‘Sapnap.’ He warns lowly, threat evident in his words. Dream circles around the fire, and goes to him, heart pounding and needing security. He feels like his entire world has been rocked, and he clings to the soft lining of Techno’s cloak as Phil finishes up the food.

The conversation returns slowly, light chatting, and the atmosphere relaxes a little.

'Dream, you can eat.' Techno murmurs. Dream looks down, and realises that he's gripping his spoon tightly, knuckles white, but yes, he hasn't taken a single bite.

He's been waiting for permission again, without even realising it.

Sapnap steals glances across at Dream the whole time, but doesn't directly talk to him again. Almost the second dinner is over, Techno begins to ask Sapnap about what Quackity is doing.

It turns out that George was right. Quackity was responsible for Sapnap's injury. His voice shakes when he describes the blind fury that Quackity had flown into when he found out that Sapnap was still near Las Nevadas. He'd tried to escape without either of them getting hurt, but Quackity's axe had caught his leg just as he was slipping out of reach. He'd stumbled his way here, bleeding and in agony, and collapsed behind the boulder. It was pure luck that they'd taken shelter so close by.

Sapnap is exhausted, and so is everyone else, except perhaps Phil, who seems to have endless energy since their journey through the forest. They clean up after dinner, and Phil offers to take first watch as they settle into their bedrolls. Sapnap sleeps on Phil's, for tonight. The healing potions seems to have expedited his recovery significantly – he has colour back in his cheeks, and seems to be relatively mobile. He sets up his mat away from the group.

Dream hates that he's relieved by that.

He unrolls his sleeping bag between Techno and George's. He sleeps with his sword under his pillow, as does Techno.

The night passes with little of interest occurring. But waking up and seeing Sapnap, leaning against a tree by the fire feels like a hallucination.

They make a brief moment of eye contact as Dream shuffles sleepily to make himself a hot chocolate.

'How did you escape?' Comes the voice from behind him as he fills up his mug. Dream closes his eyes. *They're doing this now?*

He turns, and settles onto his coat, which he's spread across the floor to stop the dew soaking into his clothes. They're facing each other now. Apart from George, the others are around, doing small tasks or idling their time. All of them are keeping an eye on Dream though, he can tell.

'Techno and Phil.' He says quietly.

'They rescued you?' Sapnap sounds disbelieving. Dream just nods. 'How?' He presses, and Dream sighs.

'Fought Sam. Stole the keycards.' He doesn't want to talk about this, he's still getting used to Sapnap even being in his life again, the last thing he wants to do is describe how he escaped from the cell Sapnap locked him in. It's uncomfortable and agitating.

'And then what? Where'd you go?'

Dream turns quickly to face him, and all of a sudden a lot of anger bubbles up from his chest. *He doesn't want to talk about this.* He squashes it down forcefully. *Don't answer back, don't be rude.*

'They looked after me.' He replies plainly, trying to keep emotion out of his voice.

Sapnap doesn't speak for a long minute. Dream drinks his hot chocolate in silence.

‘Was the prison that bad? Is that why you’re scared?’ He asks, a hint of disbelief in his voice.

And Dream cannot listen to this anymore.

His hand twitches involuntarily, itching for the sword at his belt. He was so sure that he was beyond any desire for revenge. And yet, now, listening to Sapnap ask him how bad the fucking prison was, he is filled with a familiar, burning rage.

He stands up suddenly, but instead of drawing his weapon, Dream stalks over to Sapnap, who stands up straight instantly. He feels vindictive, and cruel, and he pushes up the sleeve of his shirt to reveal the scars, permanently etched from countless burns, slashes and cuts. He shoves it into Sapnap’s face.

He looks at it with horror, and then, *and then*, he has the nerve to try to avert his gaze. Dream forces his way back into Sapnap’s field of view.

He’s not escaping this.

Dream didn’t, after all.

He throws his arm down, and moves onto his lower leg, the burn scars rough and shiny, still barely fully healed.

Then he unbuttons the top of his shirt. And watches as the colour drains from Sapnap’s face in an instant. The brand is clear, dark, angry red against Dream’s collarbone.

In a moment of pure, unbridled rage, Dream tightly grabs Sapnap’s hand, and presses his palm to the scar. Sapnap’s face is contorting, shame and sadness and nausea at war with each other, and when Dream finally throws down his hand, he collapses against the tree.

And Dream, fury still bubbling in him, turns, and heads back to his bedroll.

Chapter 22

Chapter Summary

The prison.

Chapter Notes

hello! pls have my dream+sapnap angst. I struggled writing this one but i think it turned out alright, so enjoy! Comments and kudos give my adhd something to munch on for motivation, so if you want to, please feel free to leave them!

Warnings: Discussion of torture

Sapnap doesn't follow him. Dream is glad. He chugs the rest of his water, trying to wash the bitter taste from his mouth, and packs up the rest of his stuff. The others are staring at him. It makes him squirm a bit. He tries not to acknowledge them, and eventually they go back to what they were doing, except George, who quietly pulls him aside.

'What happened?' He asks, wary and with one eyebrow raised. Dream purses his lips, and sighs.

'He asked if the prison was really that bad.' He spits out after a second. George's face morphs into shock, and then angry disbelief, as if he can't imagine that Sapnap would be so callous.

'I don't care that he didn't know what Quackity was doing. Is throwing me in solitary confinement for the better part of a year not fucking awful enough?' Dream rants in a furious whisper. 'What gives him the right-the fucking audacity to ask if it was really bad enough to justify me being fucking scare-' He takes a deep breath, '-me not wanting to be around him.'

He shoves his coat into the top of his bag.

'Does he think I'm going to grovel? Get on my fucking knees and beg him to take me back into his life?' He continues, words dripping with rage. 'As if I even knew half of what I was doing? As if I haven't been punished enough for it anyway?'

He throws his rucksack onto the ground. George looks like he doesn't know what to say, but Dream doesn't want input, he just wants someone to *listen*.

'When he visited me, he told me I deserved to be in there for *the rest of my life*.' His voice is higher now, choked with tears. 'Why am I irredeemable? *Why me?* Because I was the person easy to call evil and lock out of sight?'

Dream sucks in a deep breath.

'I'm not going to sit here and let him act like he's a paragon of moral virtue, as though he didn't condemn me to a lifetime of torture without a second thought.' He finishes venomously, picking up his rucksack again and throwing it onto his shoulders. He stomps out of the campsite without a

look back.

The others follow, at a distance. Sapnap has made a walking stick from a broken branch, and he walks at the back, beside George. Dream can hear them talking, and it only enrages him more. He tramps through the dirt and trees without a second thought, simply fuelled by a desire to be alone, and away from Sapnap. He's still furious, and after his initial glance, he doesn't spare a look back to check that they're following him. He kicks a rock angrily out of his path. How dare Sapnap ask that? How dare he?

Dream is so lost in his spiralling thoughts that he doesn't realise that the others are calling to him until Techno grabs his arm. He spins around, and glares at his friend. 'What?' He asks harshly.

Techno raises an eyebrow. 'Look.' He intones, and jerks his head towards the horizon. Dream looks up.

The prison is looming out of the clouds, just visible in the distance.

Oh, fuck.

A wave of panic rushes through him. He can't take his eyes off it, an imposing shadow, a blot on the landscape.

Dream steadies himself with a backwards step. Techno's arm comes up to his shoulder and Dream, grateful for the support, grabs onto it. He drags his eyes away from it, to the others, who've caught up to him now.

'Is it safe to be here?' He asks, suddenly painfully aware of how close they are. Techno shakes his head.

'No. We need to find a place to camp, and plan.' He says gruffly, hand still on Dream's shoulder. Dream nods mutely.

They settle on the floor of a ravine, setting out their camp overshadowed by rocks. They set up a perimeter to keep mobs out, and block off cave entrances nearby. It's familiar work, and only mid-afternoon by the time they're done. Techno leads the discussion on that to do next.

'How close is the SMP to war?' He asks, directing his words at Tommy and Sapnap.

Tommy shrugs. 'Last I heard, Tubbo was getting pissed off, but everyone else was calm.'

Sapnap shakes his head. 'Everybody is braced for war now. Niki and Ranboo are holed up together somewhere, Quackity is accusing people of being traitors to Dream left and right, but I think he's decided it's the Eggpire.' He swallows. 'And Karl's just. Gone.' His voice tightens at that. Dream feels a twinge of empathy at that. He'd had six months alone, thinking that everyone he ever knew had abandoned him. It seems like Sapnap had had a lesser, but still similar experience.

Dream and George being gone, Karl disappearing, Quackity breaking up with him. It had to have felt awful.

'What should we be most concerned about?' Techno queries.

'Q.' Comes the response, definite and a little spiteful. Techno nods. 'And where is he based?'

Sapnap looks down. 'Las Nevadas. It's to the south. But if-if you're planning to fight him, you should draw him out. Somewhere off his turf.'

‘Maybe we can ambush him?’ Tommy supplies helpfully, but Techno shakes his head.

‘This is more...a diplomatic issue. We need to de-escalate the tension in the SMP as a whole, not just kill Quackity. It’s delicate.’ He steeples his fingers, deep in thought.

‘What about getting in contact with Niki and Ranboo?’ Phil suggests, which strikes Dream as a little random, but Techno agrees.

They go round in circles for hours, getting more and more het up, until Phil finally gets up and commands that they all take a break. Techno and Tommy look like they want to continue arguing, but both wither under Phil’s gaze, and disappear to separate corners of their little camp. George goes to lie down, and Dream is tempted to join him, but the sun is setting, and instead he finds a large, flat rock to lie down on, and watches as the stars begin to appear above his head. He’s only had a moment’s peace when the silence is broken.

‘Can I join you?’

Sapnap’s voice rings out through the cold air. Dream was expecting it. Maybe that’s why he chose to lie, out here, alone. It was going to happen sooner or later.

‘Free country.’ He replies sardonically. There’s a beat, before Sapnap speaks again.

‘I didn’t know that-that that’s what Quackity was doing.’ He’s not doing any small talk. Dream can appreciate that.

‘What did you think he was doing, coming to visit me every day for six months, then?’ He spits out. On the edge of his vision, he sees Sapnap flinch, and then take a seat on the rock. Dream remains lying down.

‘I didn’t know where he was going, actually.’

‘Well, maybe you should have paid a little more attention.’ Dream says venomously. The vitriol is impossible to keep out of his voice, spewing up from the pit of his stomach like acid.

‘I know.’ Comes the quiet response. And then a long pause. And then.

‘Was it really all-all him? Did anyone else...y’know? Is he responsible for it all?’

Dream scrunches up his eyes, a tear leaking infuriatingly down the side of his face. Suddenly, he can’t keep it in.

‘Why do you care now? Why not six fucking months ago, Sapnap? Why not nine months ago, when you left me to rot and die alone? Because you know what? That was the worst part, the worst part *by far*, knowing that it was you who put me in there.’ He’s not shouting, but he may as well be, from the impact it has.

‘Do you want me to explain every last scar? Huh? What do you want from this conversation, Sapnap? Your fiancé tortured me every single day for six months. I’m lucky I still have all my limbs. That’s the fucking truth.’

He turns away. He can hear Sapnap’s deep breathing as he presumably attempts to force down tears.

It makes his heart clench. He continues his tirade, mouth dry and brain spinning.

‘That prison is hell. Even without Quackity. Nobody deserves it. I know, I’m the one who built it, but I was *wrong*. I was fucking wrong, and I don’t want anyone to experience it *ever again*.’ He gets out.

He finishes there. He can’t carry on without talking himself in circles and sinking into traumatic memories and pain.

‘George says you were...different. Ill.’ Sapnap is hesitant. Dream closes his eyes. He still doesn’t get it.

‘Yes. I was. But it doesn’t matter. That shouldn’t happen to anyone. It doesn’t matter.’ He repeats, to hammer the point home.

There’s a long pause. So long, that Dream glances over to make sure Sapnap is still there, and hasn’t silently slunk off. He’s sitting, knees apart and to his chest, arms linked around them. He’s staring at Dream still.

‘I’m sorry.’

Pause. They look away.

‘Thanks.’

The stars are out now. Sapnap lies down on his back, about half a metre from him.

‘I’m not okay, Sapnap.’ He says, after a minute. ‘I-I don’t know if I’m ever going to be okay.’

And it’s true. Every adversity he faces that sends him into a panic reminds him that he will live with the damage of what happened in that cell for the rest of his life. It’s painful, and he needs Sapnap to know that a muttered apology doesn’t make Dream healed.

‘I can’t just-things are never going back to how they were. I can’t- none of us can.’ He takes a deep breath.

Sapnap clears his throat.

‘I want to make things better, Dream. I’m not good at apologising but I want you to know that, okay? You were acting crazy, and I was so pissed at you, and that-that’s why I agreed to put you in prison. I didn’t- I didn’t really think you’d be in there forever, I guess.’

‘Then why did you say it?’ Dream replies harshly.

‘Because I was mad! I’m still-you were a bad person back then, Dream! You did all that shit to Tommy during exile, you were going to kill Tubbo-’

‘And I was doing that because of what, Sapnap? You think I just woke up one morning, and made the conscious fucking decision to act like that?’

He’s speaking in whispers now. There’s a moment of silence between them as Sapnap digests Dream’s response.

‘I didn’t realise how far I’d gone until it was too late. And nobody stopped me.’ He says quietly. ‘I didn’t- I was so scared of losing everything and everyone.’

‘That doesn’t make it okay.’

Dream sighs. ‘I know. I’m not defending what I did. I just want the chance to do better.’

He has spent all his anger now, left just with a hollow feeling and a sense of homesickness for his old friend. He changes the subject before things get too emotional, because he’s cried enough already today.

‘What are you going to do? When we see Quackity?’

‘He tried to kill me. I want nothing to do with him.’ Sapnap responds immediately.

His reply makes Dream’s heart soar, just a little, before he catches it and squashes it down. Words are one thing, actions are another. He can’t get too excited.

But he also can’t deny that he’s missed Sapnap. His presence is familiar, if no longer comforting, and the sound of his voice is...nice. Dream nods.

And then, a few minutes later, they are called over for dinner. The pair walk over in silence, a few feet from each other. They collect their food, and then, tentatively, take a seat a metre or so from each other, with nobody in between them. Dream barely gets a mouthful of food in before the tactical conversation begins again.

‘Here’s the plan.’ Techno takes the lead. ‘Listen to it all the way through, and then we can discuss it.’

Chapter 23

Chapter Summary

The meeting begins.

Chapter Notes

hello! So sorry for the wait. As anyone else with ADHD will attest, finishing projects can be painful and almost impossible, so I'm really struggling to write atm, but I really enjoyed the way this one came together. I'm quite sad that the story's coming to a close soon! I may end up writing an epilogue, depending on how the next two chapters pan out, but either way there will be a conclusion very soon.

Also shh super secret news - I'm planning on writing an SBI foster family fanfiction (yes, mostly because I've run out of ones to read lol). It should be starting relatively soon after the end of this one. It'll likely be a similar length or a little shorter, so if you don't hate my writing and (like me) are a sucker for SBI anything, stick around!

As always, comments and kudos are wildly appreciated and gratefully received, hope you enjoy :)

Warnings:

Mentions of vomiting

Techno is succinct and correct. His entire plan revolves around sweeping the legs out from Quackity by shocking him with the appearance of Dream, and then using that momentum to prove that he's corrupt, and so is Sam. The ideal goal is to unite the server against Quackity and Sam, and then convince them to accept help.

That's where the plan differs from what happened to Dream, back when he'd been confronted by the entire server. The aim isn't to kill or imprison them, it's to convince them that they don't need to do all this. That they can have everything they want without resorting to cruelty and violence.

The way to gather everyone together, Techno puts forward, is to ask Ranboo and Niki to spread the word of an announcement, and then walk straight into the middle of the SMP. Simple, but unexpected. There are six of them now – all hardened fighters, and in Techno and Dream's cases, unmatched in combat. Sapnap's alliance adds more to their argument too. The plan is to come across as rational, calm and to de-escalate. To be stable and sure of themselves, in comparison to Quackity's unhinged state.

And hope that he doesn't have more friends than they thought.

Once Techno has finished, he opens up the floor for questions, leaning back and holding his arms out for a second before dropping them to his side.

Sapnap looks annoyed. Dream is dreading his input a little – he doesn't want Sapnap and Techno to be at each other's throats, but Sapnap jumps in before anyone else has a chance to.

'Have you asked Dream how he feels about being used as tactical shock value?' His voice is accusatory, and Dream, once he's processed the meaning of his words, is gobsmacked. Techno is too, if his expression is anything to go by. He looks to Dream, who meets his eyes, then they both look back to Sapnap.

'I'm just saying. It's a bit of a jarring way to do it.' He's less aggressive now, and more explanatory.

He's right. Dream is scared of Quackity, and he's long associated him with some of the most traumatic moments of his life.

Techno shifts in his seat, and looks to Dream. 'That's...fair,' He concedes. 'Dream?'

Dream swallows. Five pairs of eyes stare at him expectantly, awaiting his answer.

'I think-I think I can do it. But I don't want to be alone. Ever.' He says stiltedly. 'Please don't leave me alone near him.'

The others all nod, almost in synchronicity. Sapnap lets out a little affirmative noise.

'Anything else?' Techno asks, and it's met with silence. It's a good plan, the best one they've come up with at least. Techno is a master strategist, and Dream trusts his judgement implicitly.

'Alright,' Phil says, 'one more night, and then tomorrow, we do it.'

They settle into their routines uneasily. Dream thanks Sapnap quickly, and waves to George, who's heading to bed. Techno uses a carrier crow to send a letter to Ranboo and Niki, and Tommy keeps watch, looking to the ravine's craggy surface expectantly, hand gripping his sword. He looks nervous. When Dream asks him what's wrong, he jumps violently, pulling away from Dream with a wild look. A second later, he relaxes.

'Sorry.' He grimaces. 'The last time I was in a hole in the ground with you, I mean, it wasn't very pleasant.' Tommy sounds distant and uncertain. 'I just-the idea of Q catching us off guard when someone could be keeping watch just...' He shakes his head.

Dream is grateful for his vigilance, even though it fills him with guilt. He leaves Tommy to it. Phil is nearby, and Dream's in the mood for company, to distract him from the sense of impending doom making a home in his stomach. Phil's sitting peacefully on the ground, head tilted up to the sky, eyes closed against the wind. Dream settles next to him with a gentle greeting, which is returned. They're both silent for a minute, and Dream realises he hasn't really spent time with Phil in a good while.

He's missed his quiet calm, the way he somehow manages to exude a sense of controlled peace. Just as he's wondering whether or not Phil actually wants company, his thoughts are interrupted by his voice

'You know, Wil was a lot like you.' Phil's voice is light and a little sad. Reminiscent, perhaps, would describe it. 'When I first met him.'

Dream tilts his head. 'When you first met... your son?' He asks, confused.

Phil nods. 'He was my son. Him and Tommy, they're my boys. But we didn't-I'm not blood

related. They aren't either, to each other, I mean. I found them in a backalley when they were about 11 and 9.'

Dream blinks. This is news to him.

'They were terrified of me. Tommy would fuckin' scream at me whenever I came close.' He says, with a little chuckle. 'And Wil was like, stony silent, all the time. He wouldn't let me get anywhere near him, touch him, nothing. It was depressing, to be honest.'

'I never learned exactly what-or who, I guess - hurt him, but somehow, the notion that everyone could, and would, hurt him, was very firmly implanted in his brain.' Phil continues. 'And that included me, for years.'

Dream feels as though he's being invasive just by listening, but Phil seems happy to share.

'There's a reason I could understand you well, when you first woke up.' Phil says quietly. 'I learned it from looking after Wil. And you're not Wil, I know that, and I don't want you to be. But sometimes - I mean, maybe it's the clothes - but sometimes I really do look at you and see him.'

Dream leans against his shoulder gently.

'What happened to Wil isn't going to happen to me, right?' Dream whispers. Phil chuckles gently.

'No, no, definitely not. I can at least prevent *that* pretty easily.' And Dream laughs in response.

'But I feel like, I don't know, I feel like I've atoned for how I failed him, somehow. Maybe that's selfish of me. And don't get me wrong, I would've done it regardless. But I hope he'd be proud of me. And you.' Phil's voice has dropped to a murmur.

Dream doesn't reply. The idea of Wilbur, his sometimes rival, sometimes friend, being proud of him fills him with bittersweetness. They sit there, watching the stars get brighter and more numerous as the low light of the fire dies. Eventually, they move to their bedrolls, and fall into a restless, but thankfully dreamless sleep.

The following morning is almost unbearable. Everyone is nervous and tense, even Phil. They pack up their rucksacks in silence, and deposit all but the essentials of combat in a hollow tree stump at the top of the ravine, covered by Techno's groundsheet to keep rain and bugs out. They walk in pairs, all silent except for Techno and Sapnap, who head up the line, talking seriously about strategy. Techno appears to have taken Sapnap's interjection yesterday very well, and seems to be consulting him rigorously about the goings on of the SMP. The rest of them, him and George in the middle, and Tommy and Phil behind, are silent.

The prison looms on the horizon again within half an hour of them setting off. As they skirt around the border of woodland that surrounds it, a carrier crow appears, cawing, and perches onto Techno's head with a ruffle of feathers. The letter it carries has Techno's name scrawled in messy handwriting, and dusted with flour.

'Dear Techno and Phil,

We've spread the news of the announcement. Everybody is hanging around near the ruins of Church Prime, including Quackity and Sam, like you asked. I must confess, your note didn't surprise us much. We've thought for a long time that Dream must have escaped Pandora's Vault. I am pleased to see that it's true. We'll be in the crowd. If you need to look to us for support, you will have it.

Niki and Ranboo.'

Dream still doesn't understand the connection between Phil, Ranboo, Techno and Niki, but this is such good news that he doesn't question it. Now there are eight of them, two hidden in the crowd, against Quackity and Sam. In combat, they'd wipe the floor with the pair of them. Dream catches himself quietly hoping it devolves to violence, before he remembers what that led to last time, and immediately feels sick to his stomach.

He can't take the easy route anymore. It's time to choose better than that.

Techno waves the crowd off his head, and sends it away. They continue their walk towards the town, moving faster now that Sapnap's leg has had time to rest, and they're not weighed down by their cumbersome packs. It's only when they catch a glimpse of movement on the prime path that Dream balks, and, as he's been expecting for a while, turns and gags into a nearby bush. His stomach is churning painfully. *Fuck, I can't do this. Fuck. He's there, he's right there.*

George is at his side at an instant, rubbing soothing circles on his back. 'Hey, hey, come on. We're almost there. Only a few more steps to go, Dream.' He's being gentle and soft. Encouraging. Dream rarely sees this side of George. He catches his head in his hands.

'I can't do it, I can't-I can't see him again. I should have just given him the fucking revive book, and none of this would have happened-' He doesn't really mean it. But as he sinks to the ground, panic attack barely kept at bay, George sinks with him.

'Dream.' His voice sounds hazy, like he's hearing it through a tunnel. He can make out worried expressions from the others, especially Sapnap, who hasn't ever witnessed this before.

'Dream?' It's clearer now. 'Dream.' His name again. He can feel the pounding in his ears begin to subside. George's hand on his back grounds him.

'I'm-yeah, I-'m-I'm okay. I just- can we stop for a second?'

The others nod. Techno looks stressed, but he doesn't say anything, just rapidly swings his gaze between the Church and the forest they've emerged from.

'Do you really wish you'd given him the book?' George asks quietly a few minutes later, after Dream's breathing has slowed. Dream shakes his head.

'No. I do wonder, though, would he-would he have stopped? If I had given it up.'

George looks at him incredulously.

'Dream. He sewed your mouth shut. It was never about the revive book.'

His words ring in Dream's ears for a long time. He's right, of course. It was probably never *really* about the book. It was about power, and wanting someone to hold it over. And yes, the revive book was a nice extra, but Dream suspects that Quackity relished in the excuse to torture him.

He picks himself up, with the help of George, and brushes himself off. 'Okay. Let's go.' He breathes. Techno nods, raises his head, and leads the way directly down the prime path, towards Church Prime and the SMP's inhabitants.

It's a surreal, terrifying experience. They are quickly spotted by Tubbo and Ranboo, who call out Tommy's name, until they catch sight of Dream, and fall into shocked silence. George grips his hand tightly, and Dream, in a moment of impulse, reaches out and grabs Sapnap's hand too. The

three of them, for a second, are together again. And then Dream lets go of both. He will stand on his own, his friends there because they support him, not because he needs them.

Techno looks over his shoulder, and raises his eyebrows at Dream, who nods. He can hear confused voices and yelling, until everyone knows that he's here, he's out of the prison, and *what's that on his face? And why is he with Techno? And Tommy? And Sapnap?*

Dream doesn't blame them for their confusion. They must look like a completely random group of people, with nothing in common, least of all a goal like take down the would-be tyrannical governor of the SMP. He spots Niki, who is still wearing her apron, and Punz, who's sword is held loosely in his grip from shock.

Almost as if directed, Quackity and Sam are directly opposite them as they approach. It's practically cinematic. Dream can't bring himself to look up yet. Techno is still in front of him, Sapnap and George to either side, and Tommy and Phil behind him. He is safe. He is protected.

And yet, he feels so fucking scared.

They get closer and closer, ignoring any questions from the crowd, until only a few metres separate them.

Quackity's voice fills his ears, raging through his mind and beating down every single ounce of bravery it can find. It almost makes him fall over, kneel and grovel right there.

'Sapnap, care to explain what you're doing with them?'

Chapter 24

Chapter Summary

A confrontation.

Chapter Notes

hello!! this has been a chapter i've both absolutely loved writing, and been incredibly nervous about posting. I really hope you like the way it goes :) enjoy. As always, comments and kudos are much MUCH appreciated <3

Warnings: mentions of torture

Sapnap, in lieu of a response, draws his sword. Dream is almost about to smack his hand, before he hears a sound that makes his stomach drop, and icy cold water flush through his veins. He almost stumbles, despite standing still.

Quackity laughs.

‘Oh, so you’re going to kill me? Is that the idea?’

Silence. Dream is hyper aware that they are being watched by the entire SMP. Sapnap takes a few steps forward, and the entire group shifts out of place.

‘I’m not going to hurt anyone. I’m not you.’ Sapnap gets out, through gritted teeth.

‘Oh, of course, because this is coming across as very pacifist.’ Quackity is taunting him, and Dream notices that Sapnap is refusing to meet his former fiancé’s eyes. He wonders exactly how bad things had got for him before they’d had their fight. Had Quackity made him feel powerless, like he had with Dream? Had he relished it?

In contrast to the feral gleam in Quackity’s eyes, Sam is simply staring at them all in awe, as if he can barely believe they’re all here.

‘You have a war pig, a child, a hermit, a glorified crow and, oh yes, a *criminal* as your allies. And you dare to waltz in here as if you have the moral high ground?’ Quackity drawls, almost as though he’s performing for the crowd. It doesn’t quite hit the mark of confidence, instead falling into the category of uncanny.

Sapnap just shrugs, clearly uncomfortable at the way he’s been singled out. Dream’s anxiety is rising with every word that comes out of Quackity’s mouth, he can feel himself shaking all over. Bitter bile is in his throat, and he can feel himself slipping a little, the way he used to back in the prison. Just floating away, dissociating from reality to make it hurt a little less. He staggers backwards a few steps without meaning to, met with a hand on his shoulder from Phil.

He just catches the little grin Quackity flashes as he does. And then Techno opens his mouth.

‘How’s your headache, Quackity?’ He says casually, picking his nails before looking up. ‘Feeling better yet?’

It’s a goad, and it works. Quackity’s hackles rise and he almost huffs with indignation.

‘Okay, enough small talk. You’re here to kill me, so kill me. You have me outmatched in combat, that’s obvious. Why are we hanging around chatting?’ He speaks quickly now, with no fear in his words, but definitely some attempt to maintain control of the conversation.

‘Or is it because none of you have the guts to do it? Tommy, I have to say, I’m surprised to see you there.’

Tommy’s eyes narrow.

‘Do you not have any backbone? Do you really still do whatever your Dad tells you?’

‘No, what the hell?’ Tommy snaps back. ‘This is what I want.’

‘Really? You *want* to forgive and forget what Dream did to you? You want to forgive exile? And killing you? I mean-’ He holds his hands up in mock placation. ‘Your choice. But personally, I’d find that pretty hard to get over.’

‘Yeah? Well it’s all thanks to you, Big Q. You tortured him.’ Tommy’s voice is loud, and it brings a swell of noise from the onlookers. Ranboo looks queasy, and Puffy’s hand goes to her mouth.

Quackity tilts his head a little.

‘Hm. So you’re saying if I hadn’t tortured him, you’d still be ready to kill him?’

An admission – so easily obtained. Quackity isn’t reading the crowd correctly, not at all. Dream wonders, once again, about whether he’s in his right mind. Even Sam seems pale, and looks up at Quackity nervously.

‘No, I mean-no!’ Tommy looks agitated.

It’s funny, how they walked up the path together, as one unit, and yet here Quackity is, driving fractures between them. Phil and Techno share a worried look. Dream is still reeling from the shock of hearing his torturers voice, seeing him in front of him, so it shocks him when he feels himself begin to speak. It’s like he’s detached from his body, floating a little above the ground.

‘Quackity, please-’

‘Don’t talk.’ His voice is quiet but forceful, and it shoots Dream in the chest. He almost turns and runs right then. This is the first time he has directly acknowledged Dream’s presence.

There’s harsh buzzing in his ears as the panic rises, and Dream can see Techno shouting and Sam looking scared and Phil walking up and- *oh my God it’s about to turn into a fight.*

Dream grabs George’s hand, and closes his eyes. This is exactly what he’d hoped to avoid. But he can hear Techno’s sword being unsheathed and he tenses for the sound of metal clashing and-

‘Stop. Stop.’ Sam’s voice is croaky. Dream looks up, confused. He looks at Sam properly now, really looks at him. He is wrecked. He has dark circles on dark circles, and he’s thin. With a shaking hand, he drops his sword on the ground, and then wrenches off his helmet too.

‘Stop. I don’t-I can’t do this. I’m not-this isn’t who I want to be. Anymore.’ He steps towards them, and Dream draws back, unwilling to be within arms reach of his warden. But to his surprise, Sam just meets his eyes exhaustedly, and then glances back to Techno.

‘If you want to take me to the prison, I understand. But let me-I want to talk to Puffy. Please. I don’t know what’s happened to me. I want to get better.’

And with that, he almost collapses to the sidelines. Puffy and Ponk crowd around him.

The Warden is gone.

And, Dream dares to hope, his friend Sam is back in his place.

Quackity looks shocked. And furious. His hands fiddle with the axe at his belt conspicuously - this isn’t going the way he planned at all. He looks around the crowd, in a vain attempt to find support. But everyone can see the scar on Dream’s face. Can see how he stumbles a little, one ankle weak. Can see the burn he has exposed on his chest. Dream cannot be lying, cannot be manipulating his way through this one, he is living proof of Quackity’s cruelty.

That’s what he gets for signing his name on his work.

He takes a second to steady himself, and Dream can almost see his brain racing through options and strategies.

‘Very good. This is a performance, right? From all of you? Walking into town like you’re hot shit? Do you feel proud of yourselves for defending the person we all hate? The person who ruined this server, the one who-‘

‘Shut up, Q!’ It’s George’s turn now. Dream must admit, it feels remarkably one sided. Everyone is having a pop at Quackity, who stands up there, just him against the world. He almost feels sorry for him. He’s alone.

‘Do you think anything, *anything*, will *ever* justify what you did? Six months?’ His voice is harsh and Quackity looks even more concerned.

‘Phil,’ He rounds on the winged man desperately, voice rising in panic. ‘Phil, he has the revive book. You know what that means, right? You can get him back.’

Phil stares.

‘But he’ll never give it up, because he’s that fucking selfish. You will never see Wilbur again if you don’t let me get the book out of him.’

Phil blinks. Several times.

Dream doesn’t even hold his breath. He is not worried for a second that Phil will betray him. And he’s right.

‘How can you look me in the eyes and say that to me?’ Phil’s voice rings out, high in emotion and tense. Dream catches Niki’s eyes. They’re brimming with tears, he can see them even at a distance. She gives a little nod, and then looks away. Quackity’s expression changes, as he’s been caught out once again. He opens his mouth, probably to attempt to mitigate his words, but Phil continues.

‘I regret what I did to him. But I’m not going to stand here and pretend that he was perfect. And virtuous. And never hurt anyone.’

‘And you know what? Dragging him back from the dead to what? Make *me* feel better?’ He shakes his head ‘No, I couldn’t do that. I would never do that.’

There a squeak from their left, and suddenly Phil is enveloped in a hug from Niki, who’s clinging to his waist tightly. She lets go after a moment, but Dream catches whispers of frantic words to Phil, who is returning her hug tightly.

‘But he-he ruined you! All of you!’ Quackity is yelling now, out to the crowd and shifting his gaze frantically. Dream feels sympathy, watching him panic like a rat in a trap. He’s been there himself. ‘Tommy – how can you side with him after what he did to you? To Tubbo?’ He points into the crowd, voice still raised.

‘Look around, Q. You’re the only person who still holds onto it, and half of it wasn’t even about you. Stop weaponizing my trauma for your own gain. It’s pathetic.’ Tommy’s voice is trembling. He sounds so young, Dream thinks. ‘You need to stop hurting people, Q. Dream has. He’s the reason Tech hasn’t chopped your head off – he’s *changed*. Why can’t you?’

There’s a long moment of silence. Sapnap, beside him, is shifting his weight from foot to foot anxiously. Dream keeps his eyes on Quackity, who suddenly snaps his gaze to meet Dream’s.

It makes Dream flinch.

And a smile crosses Quackity’s face, just momentarily.

‘Ok. Ok. I concede. I’ll go. You’re not locking me up. I’ll go somewhere else, far away. But he’ll show his true colours again one day.’ Quackity gestures to Dream, who flinches again, and looks away.

‘And believe me, Dream,’ Quackity speaks directly to him ‘look at me when I’m talking to you.’

Dream’s head snaps up, and it feels as though it’s just him and Quackity on the entire planet.

‘Believe me. I’m not done with you.’

Dream holds his gaze. They maintain eye contact until Quackity pulls away, and just like that, he’s on his horse and gone. Disappeared, like he was never even here. Techno and Tommy follow him, track him to the edge of the town and watch as his steed kicks up dust behind him far into the distance.

And Dream feels a weight come off his shoulders like never before.

He drops to his knees, arms around himself, and cries. He can’t help himself. George and Sapnap sit next to him, gently rubbing his back. He doesn’t know how long he’s there for, but they are by his side the whole time. When he eventually looks up, the crowd has dispersed a little, although they remain chatting in groups.

He’s getting glances, constantly. Suspicion, hurt. He has a lot of conversations to have in the near future, a lot of people to ask forgiveness of. He’s just got a lot to explain, too, how he escaped, why he was gone for so long.

Tommy has returned, and is talking animatedly to Tubbo and Ranboo, who listen, entranced by his story. Niki and Phil are talking quietly together in the shade of her bakery. Sam is with Ponk and Puffy, sitting solemnly together at a distance. Ponk seems a little shaken, withdrawn, and Dream notices then that his sleeve is tied up, indicating a missing limb. He wonders how that happened – undoubtedly something to do with Quackity.

It's obvious there's a divide between them, but Dream can see the remnants of their relationship beginning to reveal themselves – in Sam's hesitant, scared words, in Ponk's gentle, calming nodding.

A shadow has been lifted from the world, it feels.

Punz, surprisingly, has hung around. He offers Dream a hand up, and he accepts.

'Good to see you.' He says gruffly, and awkwardly. 'I tried to visit but...'

Dream nods as he trails off. They talk for a minute longer, and then Punz makes an excuse to leave. Dream, though ecstatic to see that he's still considered a friend, is grateful. He looks to George and Sapnap, and the three of them excuse themselves pretty quickly to the outskirts of town, walking together. George and Sapnap chat, discussing and reliving the confrontation, but Dream, ahead of the pair, is silent. He's taking in the beauty of what's around him, safe in the knowledge that he can experience it any time he wants.

As he rounds a corner, a flash of purple and green makes him jump as it dashes out from behind a house. Karl stands before him, eyes excited and throws himself onto Dream in a hug. It takes Dream so by surprise that he doesn't even flinch, just stands there blankly, more confused than anything. Karl is whispering thank yous into his ear, over and over.

'I've seen the other-the other ways it could have gone. Thank you for-for not hurting him.' Karl looks into his eyes with such sincerity that Dream can only bring himself to nod in response.

'Karl?' Sapnap's voice is tremulous, and Karl turns and then there's yet another reunion, complete with crying and hugs and general disbelief. Dream and George leave them to it.

They climb to the top of the community house, funnily enough. It's changed even more since the last time Dream was here, the carpet is different, and there's a basement now.

Dream takes in the sight of the SMP. He doesn't feel good, but he feels okay. He feels relieved. He feels, for the first time in a long time, relatively safe.

Techno shouts up to him, returning from his chase, that Quackity is long gone, and doesn't seem to be coming back. It now occurs to him that he barely said a word to Quackity during the entire event.

Once Techno's gone, they make precious little conversation, and George eventually leaves him be, with a parting kiss to the top of his head. Dream remains up there until nightfall, when he makes his way down to the group that has remained in the town.

Food is abundant, talking aplenty, music playing and Dream watches as his friends, the people he loves most, dance through the evening with each other.

There are things to deal with – pretty much everyone from the SMP is still looking at him suspiciously, for one. But for tonight, Dream is content to watch Tommy drag Techno onto his feet and convince him to learn a two step, to watch Phil and Niki jokingly come up with some sort of long form barn dance, and to watch Sapnap and Karl, although not without awkwardness, waltz together in the corner.

George is about to ask him to dance, he can tell - he's inching nervously towards Dream, fiddling with his hands. So he packs up his self-reflection, and endeavours that tonight, for once, he is going to be okay.

Chapter 25

Chapter Summary

The server recovers.

Chapter Notes

Thank you all so very much for sticking around - shoutout to TheInvisibleSpoon and whatwitch, who have on multiple occasions made me vvvv emotional with their comments. It's always been the plan to have this ending, and I hope it meets your expectations. It's kind of like an epilogue?

I've had so much fun writing this and reading all your comments, and thank you for making my first fic a positive experience to write! As always, comments and kudos are appreciated. Enjoy.

Warnings: None.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The next few weeks, months even, are hard for Dream. He spends a lot of time making apologies, listening to people rant and cry about what he did to them. He tries his best to listen patiently, to take in their hurt and treat it with importance.

He also tries his hardest not to try and reply with excuses or explanations. This is penance, for him, but he deserves it. And it helps him understand exactly how what he did was so damaging.

Tubbo seems scared more than angry. He approaches Dream by the river, where he's fishing, and stays a very cautious distance from him. They talk – well it's mostly Tubbo talking, and Dream listening.

'I didn't want to be close to anyone because I thought it might get me killed.' He says, staring out over the flowing water. 'I'm lucky Ranboo was so understanding.'

Dream nods.

'I might have never made another friend, ever, because of what you did to me. I could have died alone.'

Dream nods again. Tubbo isn't crying, somehow, but Dream can feel the familiar sharp sting of tears building in the corners of his own eyes.

'I don't want you around me- I don't want you near me.' He says hesitantly. 'You make me scared.'

Dream closes and then opens his eyes slowly. 'Okay,' he replied, 'I get that. I'll stay away from you.'

And he does.

Dream and Ranboo have an awkward but positive reunion, as he does with Niki. Puffy seems worried about him, more than anything, but she's a great person to talk to. He tries not to take advantage of her kindness.

Fundy is Fundy. They weren't on good terms before everything went wrong, and they aren't really on good terms now either. But they talk, a little, and they can be in the same room comfortably, and that's definitely something.

The thing that makes most people convinced that he's changed is the defeat of the Egg. Predictably, once a power vacuum became evident, the Eggpire attempted to take over. They were defeated, Dream and Techno together with the rest of the server made a physical confrontation easy work. Who would have thought that unity in the face of conflict was the way to go?

Dream pushed, loudly and consistently, for the egg to be contained and destroyed, and for Bad, Ant, and the rest of them to be kept securely away from it, until they were no longer a danger.

There had been calls to execute the lot of them.

But a by few weeks later, all of them, one by one, had changed back into themselves – the people they were before they had been corrupted. It was like they had woken up from a coma, unable to remember anything that had happened while they had been under the egg's influence.

That was when people had started to really believe that Dream was a different person. Tommy and Sapnap's friendship helped too, to prove that times had changed.

In fact, Tommy was well on his way to being one of Dream's closest friends. He supposes that you can't really go through what they had without, at least, developing a grudging respect for one another. But they were hanging out together regularly, chatting and fixing up ruined buildings, and it was nice. Tommy is hilarious – Dream's always known this, but now he can actually appreciate how quick-witted he is. Tubbo still holds him at a considerable distance, but Dream can see that shortening, week by week, as he regains the trust of the server.

The hardest is Sam.

They still haven't sorted their shit out, not really. But they've talked occasionally, and Sam has apologised profusely. Dream almost doesn't want to be around him because of the amount of apologies that he gives.

The one conversation they do have about it takes place on the roof of the prison, fittingly. Sam has been tearing it down, brick by bloodied brick. Dream offered to help him, and together they slaved away, breaking down the obsidian and blackstone in weird but comfortable silence.

'This is where I escaped.' Dream says, staring at the hole that leads down to the courtyard. Sam looks up, and nods.

'You did say it was a security risk when we were planning it.' He notes, joining Dream at the edge of the chasm.

Dream nods wearily.

'Who was it that got you out? Techno and Phil?'

'Yeah. Got them to thank for everything, really.' Dream responds, taking a seat and letting his legs

dangle down into the blackness of the prison below him. It feels both cathartic and terrifying. Sam joins him.

‘Why did you do it?’ He asks, voice shaking a little. Sam looks away, and takes a long time to respond.

‘The easy answer is that I was doing what Quackity told me. But that’s not all of it. I feel like I was a different person, until a few weeks before it all went down.’

He breathes into the cold air.

‘I wanted you to be in pain.’

It cuts through to Dream’s core. Hearing the words come from his friend’s mouth.

‘Right.’ He whispers.

‘Are you angry?’ Sam asks.

‘Yes.’

They don’t talk about it much after that, but Dream thinks maybe they will one day.

Things with George are good, to say the least. They’ve nearly finished a little cottage for the pair of them, a little way out of the centre of the SMP. Dream wants to start a farm. They are happy together, in a way they never were before. Secure, stable.

There’s still excitement, of course. Just the other day, they’d played manhunt together, along with Sapnap and Bad. It’s probably one of the happiest memories that Dream has, and will ever have. It felt like they were all in sync again, the way they used to be. The humour came easily, the banter and joking insults.

He lets them keep all the enchanted compasses, just in case he’s in trouble, and he needs help.

Phil and Techno have moved into the SMP, for the time being. Phil built a grave for Wilbur, near the ruins of L’manburg, but even after that, Dream couldn’t bear to say goodbye to either of them, and vice versa. They’ve stayed to help rebuild after Quackity, and to keep an eye out in case he reappears.

Dream spends most evenings curled up on their sofa, playing games or just talking, long into the night.

He has never been happier, and he has never been more grateful.

Three months later, exactly, he gets a message from Quackity.

It’s full of rambled apologies and explanations, clearly sent in a haze of emotions. Dream can recognise parts of it as Quackity from before.

He doesn’t reply.

The days grow shorter, and then longer again. They celebrate birthdays, anniversaries, Karl and Sapnap finally get married. They finish the cottage, and Dream and Techno’s sparring takes itself to a whole new level when they discover that fishing rods can be used very effectively in combat. There are no wars, just the occasional neighbourly dispute, resolved quickly.

Dream watches as the darkness over the SMP shrinks and shrinks, until finally, one day, he realises he can't remember what it was like to be under it's control anymore.

George traces the scars on Dream's legs absentmindedly as he sits between them, book held open with one hand. They are on the porch of their little cottage, sweet summer air flowing around them, and Dream has his face to the setting sun. He can hear Techno clattering around behind him as he makes dinner, Phil and Tommy arguing in the background. Sapnap is off fishing with Karl, and they'll be back soon too.

He turns, and gives Techno a smile through the doorframe. His friend smiles back, with a little wave.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading <3.

If anyone is interested, I just posted an SBI foster family AU fic on this account, please feel free to check it out!

End Notes

kudos and comments always appreciated! I aim to update every 2 days as I post short chapters, but this is subject to change in the future as I may start to do longer chapters less often.

my tumblr is gendermen.tumblr.com, feel free to send a me message if ya fancy! I'm always happy to chat.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!